Beyond Words: Depression and the Constructed Self

a Critical Commentary on *FACE the Music*

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INTRODUCTION

> As an experience, madness is terrific I can assure you, and not to be sniffed at; and in its lava I still find most of the things I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped, final, not in mere driblets, as sanity does.[1]

Nearly a century has passed since Virginia Woolf penned those words, praising the benefits of madness on her own creative process. And yet, only a decade later, Woolf wrote another, very different letter. In it, she cited that same madness—which she had previously claimed as an invaluable source of creative productivity—as the reason she found it necessary to take her own life: 'I feel certain I am going mad again. […] And I shan't recover this time. […] So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. […] I can't go on'.[2]

Today, the myth of the mad artist continues to hold much sway in the public imagination. There is widespread belief that 'creativity and psychopathology are inextricably linked' and that without madness—or melancholia, or some other form of mental instability—great artists (particularly of past generations) would not be recognised as truly great, truly 'genius'.[3] This association has a long-established history; it is not easily dismissed. The connection was first recorded 'almost twenty-five hundred years ago' and 'since post-medieval times the idea has never again been wholly abandoned that artistic talent

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[1] Virginia Woolf, *A Reflection of the Other Person: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. IV: 1929-1931*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), p. 180. Subsequent references will be given in the text as '*Letters*', followed by page number.

[2] Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography, Volume Two, Mrs Woolf 1912-1941* (London: Hogarth Press, 1972), p. 226. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Bell', followed by page number.

[3] Anna Abraham, 'Editorial: Madness and Creativity—Yes, No or Maybe?', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6 (2015), 1-3 (p. 1). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Abraham', followed by page number.

and genius are dependent on a precariously balanced type of personality'.[4] Now, in the twenty-first century, some even claim:

> all great art comes from pain. […] the common thread that drives artistic expression of every conceivable sort—whether it's the magnum opus of a Renaissance master, a three-chord riff from a seventies punk bad, or a keenly strewn allegory by the beloved children's book author Dr. Seuss […] it all starts with the same thing: a shot of intractable unpleasantness, bubbling to the surface from deep within a tortured soul.[5]

When well-known, highly regarded creative artists—like Virginia Woolf—have praised their madness as a source of their creative abilities, the persistence and significance of the association are reinforced.

However, in recent years, numerous scientific studies have begun casting doubt on the validity of this conception. Although a significant amount of research suggests that 'artists and various members of their families have a higher incidence of psychiatric disorders than does the general population', it is becoming increasingly apparent that 'when mental disorder truly emerges, creativity *decreases*'.[6] Contemporary investigations question the correlations between creativity and mental health; when researchers attempt to go beyond 'anecdotal support', the evidence simply does not support previous assumptions.[7] Scientific inquiries are moving away from attempting to prove that either 'all highly creative people have some form of mental illness' or that 'all people who have some form of mental illness are highly

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[4] Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), p. 98. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Wittkower', followed by page number.

[5] Christopher Zara, *Tortured Artists: From Picasso and Monroe to Warhol and Winehouse, the Twisted Secrets of the World's Most Creative Minds* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2012), p. 7. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Zara', followed by page number.

[6] José Guimón, *Art and Madness*, trans. by Eoin McGirr (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 2006), p. xii. Proquest Ebook; emphasis added. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Guimón', followed by page number.

[7] Robert W. Weisberg, 'Genius and Madness? A Quasi-Experimental Test of the Hypothesis That Manic-Depression Increases Creativity', *Psychological Science*, 5.6 (Nov. 1994), 361-367 (p. 367).

creative' because the evidence of a strong affirmative correlation in that regard 'simply does not exist' (Abraham, 1). Not only that, but '[p]ast research' seems to have firmly 'established that full blown mental illness is *debilitating* for creativity'.[8]

These findings support what contemporary artists say in interviews, on blog posts and in other first-hand accounts of their personal struggles with mental illness. More often than not, artists' own accounts attest that the *least* creative periods of their lives have been when they were the most ill.[9] Furthermore, they believe that romanticising the idea of the mad artist is not only erroneous and unhelpful, but also a dangerous and potentially 'destructive myth'.[10]

To be clear, I do not mean to imply here that madness and creativity are entirely incompatible—quite the opposite. The life stories of many well-known, prolific artists like Virginia Woolf, Vincent Van Gogh, and Robert Schumann are a testament to the fact that mental disorders and substantial creativity and artistic talent can and are often found in the same individuals. The danger of the 'mad artist' stereotype, however, lies in assumptions that in order to be creative you *must* be mentally unstable and that poor mental health is *always* beneficial for creative individuals—and that truly 'great art' can *only* come from 'pain' (Zara, 7). These kinds of assumptions all too often prevent sufferers from getting the help they need—and, in worst case scenarios, frequently lead to suicide even by the most highly

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[8] Emilie Glazer, 'Rephrasing the Madness and Creativity Debate: What is the Nature of the Creativity Construct?', *Personality and Individual Differences*, 46 (2009), 755-64 (p. 760); emphasis added. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Glazer', followed by page number.

[9] Aniqah Choudhri, 'Putting the "Mad Artist" Myth to Bed', *Exeunt Magazine* (22 May 2017) <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/putting-mad-artist-myth-bed/> [accessed 3 December 2019] (para. 2 of 16).

[10] Yashi Banymadhub, 'The Tortured Artist is a Dangerous Myth. It's the Way Creative Workers are Treated that Causes Breakdown', *Independent* (10 October 2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/world-mental-health-day-tortured-artist-dangerous-myth-pain-art-depression-suicide-a8576971.html> [accessed 3 December 2019] (para. 6 of 8).

regarded of creative artists, as was the case for Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Vincent Van Gogh and countless others.

Seeking to add to discourses challenging the romanticisation of the mad artist, *FACE the Music* is a creative exploration of this highly polarising debate. The novel's protagonist, Natalie, is a musician and composer who finds herself destabilised and unable to do her best creative work due to mental illness—specifically, clinically diagnosed depression. Thus, the novel investigates the interrelatedness between madness and creativity. But *FACE the Music* also takes this investigation a step further, exploring the implications of chronic depression on its protagonist's overall sense of self—her personal identity. These explorations are consistent with current trends in identity theory that look at identity not as a fixed construct but as an ever-changing and evolving process of construction and re-construction in the present moment.[11]

Identity theory, mental health, and creativity are all, even in isolation from one another, extremely complex, fraught, and highly controversial subjects. Therefore, the research underpinning *FACE the Music* is a combination of the scientific and the cultural, the critical and the theoretical. It takes into account not only rigorously vetted academic and scientific inquiries but also ideas and conceptions that proliferate in blog entries and other social media platforms—ideas that carry weight and force in the public imagination, regardless of their factual 'provability'.

My discussion opens with a brief overview of several literary predecessors to whom *FACE the Music* is undeniably indebted. Though I note similarities between these predecessors and my own work in how music and madness function in these texts, I also highlight key differences. Most significantly, I analyse the ways in which literary

[11] Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 36. Kindle eBook. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Burke', followed by page number.

representations of music do not simply attempt a literal depiction of the experience of hearing auditory sound, but use the construct of music to interrogate characters and their circumstances. I then focus my attention on some of the best-known literary depictions of altered mental states and address the ways these depictions successfully convey extreme mental distress via the medium of language. Pointing to the ways these other literary depictions of madness were influential on my own approach, I also gesture towards more contemporary understandings of mental illness and the different, more specific space in the literary canon where I chose to locate my own creative work.

From there, my discussion turns back towards and builds upon the ideas proposed in this introduction—looking at the interrelatedness between madness and creativity—moving on to examine the ways Natalie's struggles with her specific illness of depression manifest themselves in the creative work. Contextualising my analysis with scientific research and clinical studies, I look at the amorphous nature of depression as an illness, highlighting the very personal ways in which the illness manifests itself in individual sufferers. As I draw on other creative works that look at depression, as well as the long history of illness memoirs and autobiographical accounts, I argue that there is a common thread underpinning all of the disparate accounts—scientific, fictional, and autobiographical alike: that suffering from depression separates individuals from a coherent sense of self.

My discussion then turns to identity theory, briefly outlining key conceptual considerations and emphasising contemporary postulations that identity is incredibly changeable. Based upon recent research developments, I address the ways in which daily interactions inform identity verification, as individuals strive to maintain specific, personal beliefs about themselves through the use of self-affirmations. In examples from *FACE the Music*, I highlight ways in which Natalie's behaviours reflect a subconscious desire to confirm preconceived notions she has about herself and the roles she plays. Utilising the Role

Identity Model, which defines healthy role identities as being organised within a hierarchy of prominence, I argue that it is Natalie's journey towards restructuring her personal role identity hierarchy that forms the underlying framework of the narrative and centres *FACE the Music* around identity reorganisation and reconciliation.

In the last section of this commentary, I address the Welsh setting of the work, arguing that it is not an arbitrary choice but rather an intentional one that supports theoretical considerations underpinning the creative practice. I point to recognised associations between social isolation and mental health, touch upon theories of literary geography, and highlight how being a stranger in a strange land forces Natalie to undergo the crucial identity work that is central to the text. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of the plot structure. Drawing parallels to Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, I emphasise the ways in which *FACE the Music* is intentionally structured to end with hope, but without any false promises of a permanent cure for its protagonist's chronic depression.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURES OF MUSIC AND MADNESS

My novel, *FACE the Music,* explores the interrelatedness of two fundamental thematic elements which, at first glance, seem to inherently defy codification in language—music and madness. In *Music, Madness, and the Unworking of Language*, John Hamilton claims:

> Both [music and madness] mark out a conceptual border beyond which language cannot reach. […] music and madness truly belong together, occupying the same sphere. That is to say, they are not joined simply by sharing a capacity to limit language […] but rather constitute a realm entirely removed from language use.[12]

However, in spite of this apparent incompatibility, what Hamilton suggests is not that it is wholly impossible to use language to create evocative depictions of either music or madness but rather that these depictions will always be *representations* rather than literal re-creations. In other words, within the scope of literature, music and madness will always function 'not as tonal art and mental states as such but rather as specialized metaphorical strategies' working to 'represent literature's striving toward something beyond language'—'the awed silence before the ineffable' (Hamilton, 9; 6; 10). The challenge authors face when attempting to depict music and/or madness is that of trying to capture the essence of something inherently 'irrational (or suprarational)' within language in spite of the '*rationalizing* force of the word' and the 'reductive nature of representational discourse' (Hamilton, 6; 12; 15; original emphasis). In order to address this challenge within my own work, I looked to the long, well-established literary history of other writers depicting music and madness—both in combination with and in isolation from one another. Janice Galloway's novel *Clara* is one such literary work exploring the interrelatedness between music and madness.

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[12] John T. Hamilton, *Music, Madness, and the Unworking of Language*, Columbia Themes in Philosophy, Social Criticism, and the Arts (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008; repr. 2013), pp. 5-6. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Hamilton', followed by page number.

Music and Madness in *Clara*

Clara is a fictionalised account chronicling the life of Clara Wieck Schumann—from her childhood through the many tumultuous ups and downs of her relationship with Robert Schumann, including his slow decline into madness and eventual confinement within a mental asylum where he died. Although the novel primarily follows Clara's perspective, the third person narrative also includes passages from the points of view of her father, Friedrich Wieck, and her lover and later husband, Robert. The use of multiple perspectives is a tool that Galloway employs throughout the text, one that works to interrogate both music and madness with far more nuance than would otherwise be possible. After all, Clara, Friedrich, and Robert are all persons for whom music plays a role of paramount importance in their lives. However, the importance they place upon music and its significance to them—what they value about music—is as unique and individual as they are themselves. The central characters' differing, and often conflicting, impressions of and views on music create an important thematic undercurrent running throughout the work—the notion that music is not one thing but many, shaped and defined by those who engage with it.

For Friedrich, Clara's father, music is the thing that 'changed his life forever'—the thing that made him 'important' and first brought him into contact with 'Great Men'.[13] Music was how he 'built his Life with Unswerving Dedication and Selfless Effort' to the point that he 'signifies' (Galloway, 17; original emphasis). It saved him from 'liv[ing] on bread and water, hid[ing] his shirt cuffs in public lest the fraying show' (Galloway, 17). Music is Friedrich's source of wealth and egotism, a means to an end—that end being a comfortable life and a social class to be envied by his compatriots. Clara, in contrast, places value in music

[13] Janice Galloway, *Clara* ([London]: Jonathan Cape, 2002; repr. London: Vintage, 2003), p. 17; original emphasis. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Galloway', followed by page number.

for very different reasons. For her, music is the one constant throughout her entire life. It is the source of her earliest memories:

> Sound.
>
> That memory is made of sound before it's made of anything else, she has no doubt. That it is not as ephemeral as it appears she has no doubt either. After the kiss, the glass of lemon water, the scent of orchids is gone, it's gone. But a fragment of music somehow remains. And she knows that when she is alone in bed, in the early hours before dawn, music comes whether she likes it or not: a sliver of Chopin, one stubborn phrase of Beethoven, the edges and elbows of countless songs. And these. Her earliest memories, maybe, but something etched inside the skull, heard again and again till they stuck for ever and one in the same. Father raising his inventions to the sky. Mother, in another place entirely, singing. (Galloway, 13)

All through Clara's life, music plays a role of paramount significance. In music, Clara finds 'power' and purpose within herself (Galloway, 144). Moreover, it is always there when she needs it—steady, sustaining, a source of constancy and clarity for her:

> Proof that sheer effort of will could construct a wholeness where none existed. Proof that music and those who made it could confront chaos, and find in it what was tender and fantastical and clear and true. And this was her purpose: to play such music; music that made everything, everything, come through. (Galloway, 289)

Music is not just Clara's livelihood; it gives meaning to her whole life. Robert, in contrast, is portrayed as having a much more turbulent relationship with music than either Clara or Friedrich. For him, music is simultaneously 'joy and anguish mixed' (Galloway, 204). This is due, largely, to Robert's belief that 'his music is himself: his feelings, his thoughts, his outlook, everything that affects him. […] his soul' (Galloway, 157). His feelings toward music are as unpredictably changeable as his feelings toward himself, frequently influenced by the extreme volatility of his moods—a direct consequence of his mind's slow descent into madness.

In *Clara*, madness, like music, is portrayed as being not one single thing but many—a combination of all the disparate perceptions that arise when such an irrational, ephemeral phenomenon is observed from multiple points of view. Robert's descent into madness is

experienced very differently by Robert than it is by Clara, and Galloway makes a point of including both their impressions of this journey in the narrative. In doing so, Galloway explores the multifaceted nature of madness—particularly the tension between the realities of living within the experience of madness and the societal perceptions and expectations surrounding what such an experience is 'supposed' to look like.

Robert's madness is primarily a private, personal struggle, one that exists within the depths of his own mind: '[s]ome days his head raced with new knowledge and he felt invincible, stuffed with *being*; other days he felt melancholy, even withdrawn' (Galloway, 87; original emphasis). More worrying, however, are the days when Robert's madness manifests itself as 'terrors and visions that scared away all the joy of living and replaced it with mechanical writing, hideous drawings, things fit only to hide away and be afraid of' (Galloway, 88). Still, for Robert, the true core of his madness is a feeling of absolute certainty that he is simultaneously two different people at once:

> *Florestan and Eusebius* […] both himself.
>
> It certainly explained things. Those days when he felt his head was at war with itself, shifting his mood from laughing to crying irrespective of his own wishes - now it was obvious why. Perhaps they fought with each other, his two halves; perhaps they switched in rapid rotation. Whichever, he knew both were in his seeing, his hearing, his whole existence […] (Galloway, 88; original emphasis)

And yet, Robert rejects the idea that he is mad—or, at least, he rejects the notion of being mad in terms of his society's understanding of the concept:

> […] this twinned state was his *normal state*, not madness, as once he had horribly feared. He had heard it said often enough that madness was akin to genius, indeed, some people *expected* the appearance of madness from their creative sorts. He had even seen some affect variations on lunacy the better to be thought *artistic* by potential patrons who hadn't a clue. What he had suffered had seemed wholly different. What he had suffered did not go away when the audience did; it worsened […] (Galloway, 88; original emphasis)

Robert's active rejection of the madness label is important, emphasising the tension that exists between what madness is 'supposed' to look like and what it actually is. Robert does not want

to be thought of as a madman—he believes the label will limit him, restricting him to a category and a particular understanding that does not properly reflect his own lived experience.

This tension is noted not only by Robert, but by Clara too. Although she has no way of knowing firsthand what Robert experiences in the moments when his madness overwhelms him, she is frequently forced to witness the effects of Robert's slow mental decay from an outsider's perspective:

> She had seen her husband weeping, crying out for relief from the rushing in his head, for escape from the wild pictures that tormented him. She had seen the brokenness he could not shake. She had seen him rant about treachery, shaking with fury […] She had seen him open a hotel room window, throw the catches wide as a crucifix, wondering aloud if he should End Things Now, if she would not be better off. She had heard him wonder if she *wished it so*. She had seen him drink himself into loquaciousness, becoming more and more slack-jawed into the night, and sat with him as he told her stories she did not understand, about sisters and mothers and angels and devils, devils and angels, and she had followed the line of his finger as he had shown her a star in the corner of the room — *a planet, tiny, shining bright as a flame!* — and tried, for all she was worth, to see it too. And afterwards she had seen him sit in silence for days, refusing everything but his own blackness. (Galloway, 287; original emphasis)

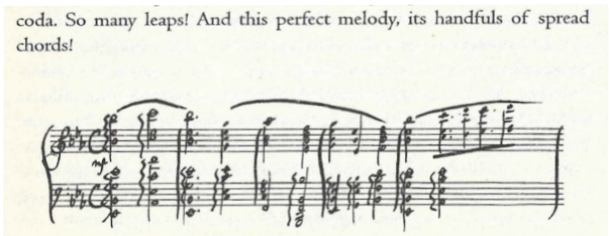
To Clara's way of thinking, Robert's behaviour is extremely abnormal and, in many ways, 'almost too terrible to bear' (Galloway, 287). But, even after she learns that he is to be confined to a mental asylum for his safety and hers, she still cannot find a way to reconcile her understanding and memories of witnessing her husband's struggles with what she believes 'madmen' are supposed to be like: 'Madmen tore their clothing; they ran half naked if not carefully watched. They were jacketed and chained for their own good. They were sex-crazed and akin to animals […]' (Galloway, 389).

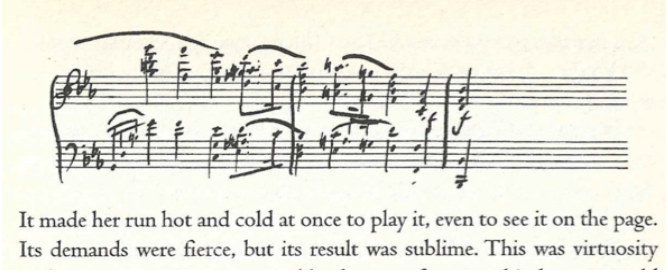
In spite of witnessing the manifestations of Robert's mental turmoil in person, Clara's overall conception of what madness is is still shaped more by societal perceptions than by her own personal experiences. But that is the very kind of misapprehension which Galloway actively pushes back against within the narrative as a whole. She takes great care to define

Robert as an individual character who is more than his society's definition of a madman. If anything, it is music—*his* music—that defines him more. And it will continue to define him even after his madness is gone: his madness dies with him; his music does not. It is on this very subject that Clara muses as Robert lies on his deathbed in the mental asylum. She sits, watching him calmly, thinking about how '[h]is music, braced ready in the stand, would have its day soon enough' (Galloway, 423). And on this note, the novel ends, with Clara waiting as '[a] breeze ruffles his music' and '[t]he pages turn and fold' (Galloway, 423). Music, not madness, has the final say in Robert's story.

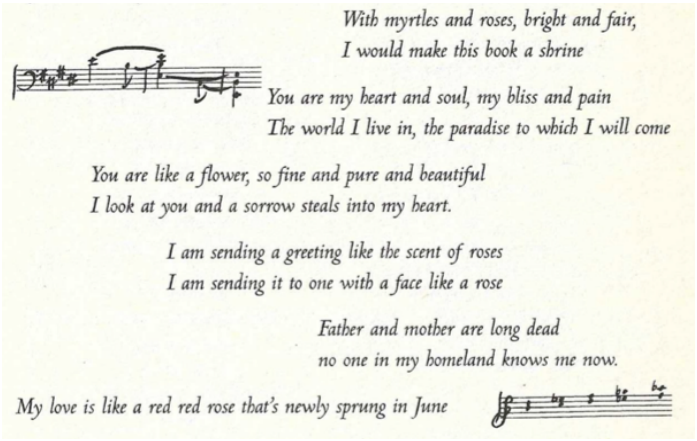
Moreover, music is, essentially, the fundamental thematic thread underpinning the narrative structure of *Clara* as a whole, given the extremely significant role music played in Clara Wieck Schumann's life. Galloway, therefore, is repeatedly faced with the challenge of attempting to depict music throughout the course of the work—of finding ways to 'interpret auditory experience by non auditory means' (Hamilton, 9). This was of particular interest to me, given the ways in which I found myself attempting to replicate similar circumstances at several points in *FACE the Music*.

In *Clara*, Galloway does not rely on one singular approach to represent music, but rather employs a combination of several different approaches throughout the novel. The first and simplest of these is her use of visual aids. Given that *Clara* is based on the lives and times of the actual Schumanns, Galloway is able to borrow snippets from their pre-existing musical compositions, inserting or superimposing images of these compositions at intervals throughout her literary work:[14]


coda. So many leaps! And this perfect melody, its handfuls of spread chords!


It made her run hot and cold at once to play it, even to see it on the page. Its demands were fierce, but its result was sublime. This was virtuosity

[14] Image page number references—this page: Galloway, 170; 171; next page: Galloway 183; 184-5.



With myrtles and roses, bright and fair,
I would make this book a shrine

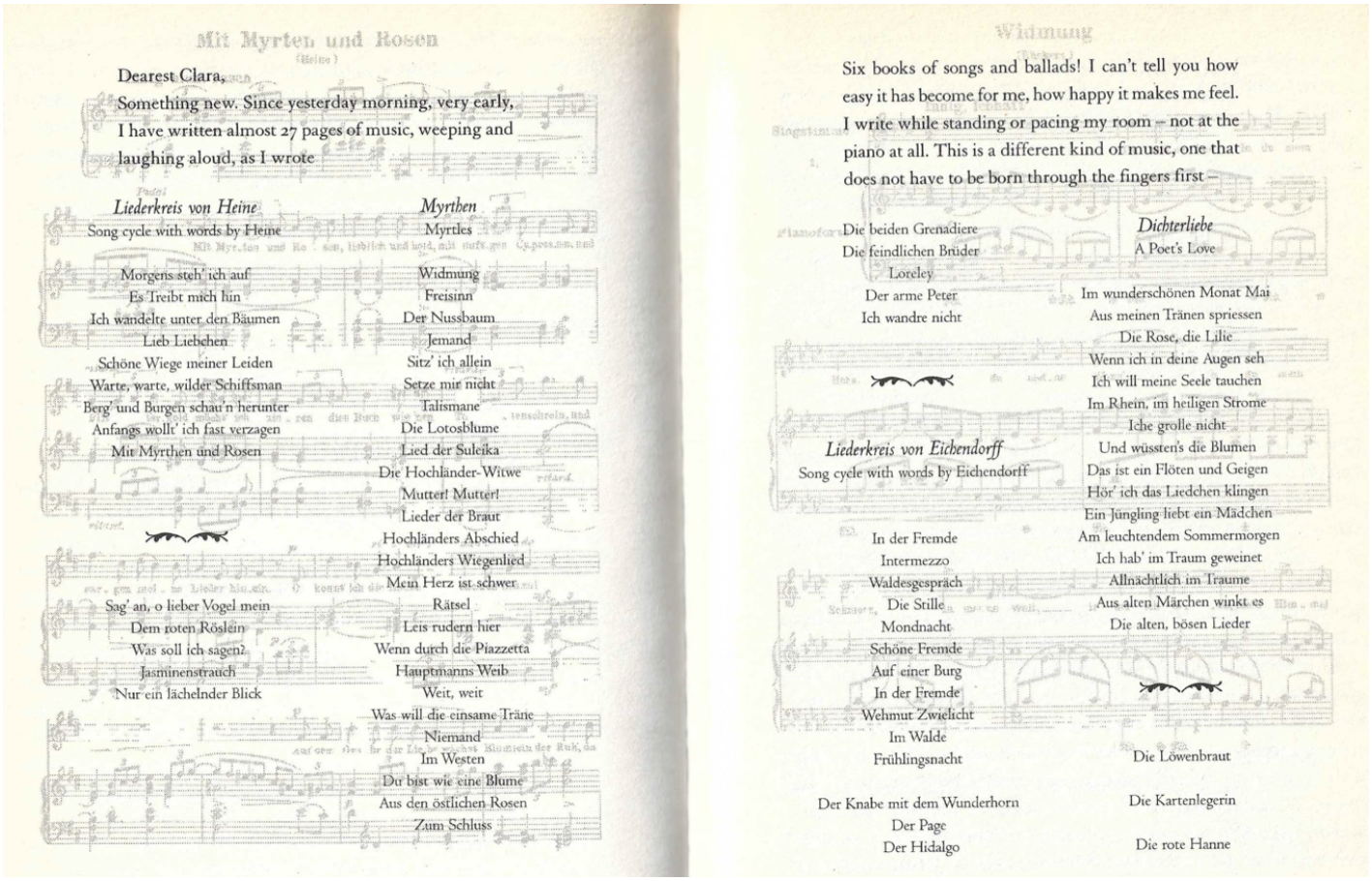
You are my heart and soul, my bliss and pain
The world I live in, the paradise to which I will come

You are like a flower, so fine and pure and beautiful
I look at you and a sorrow steals into my heart.

I am sending a greeting like the scent of roses
I am sending it to one with a face like a rose

Father and mother are long dead
no one in my homeland knows me now.

My love is like a red red rose that's newly sprung in June



Mit Myrten und Rosen

Dearest Clara,
Something new. Since yesterday morning, very early, I have written almost 27 pages of music, weeping and laughing aloud, as I wrote

Liederkreis von Heine
Song cycle with words by Heine

Morgens steh' ich auf
Es Treibt mich hin
Ich wandelte unter den Bäumen
Lieb Liebchen
Schöne Wiege meiner Leiden
Warte, warte, wilder Schiffsman
Berg' und Burgen schau'n herunter
Anfangs wollt' ich fast verzagen
Mit Myrthen und Rosen

Myrthen
Myrtles

Widmung
Freisinn
Der Nussbaum
Jemand
Sitz' ich allein
Setze mir nicht
Talismane
Die Lotosblume
Lied der Suleika
Die Hochländer-Witwe
Mutter! Mutter!
Lieder der Braut
Hochländers Abschied
Hochländers Wiegenlied
Mein Herz ist schwer
Rätsel
Leis rudern hier
Wenn durch die Piazzetta
Hauptmanns Weib
Weit, weit
Was will die einsame Träne
Niemand
Im Westen
Du bist wie eine Blume
Aus den östlichen Rosen
Zum Schluss

Sag' an, o lieber Vogel mein
Dem roten Röslein
Was soll ich sagen?
Jasminenstrauch
Nur ein lächelnder Blick

Widmung

Six books of songs and ballads! I can't tell you how easy it has become for me, how happy it makes me feel. I write while standing or pacing my room – not at the piano at all. This is a different kind of music, one that does not have to be born through the fingers first –

Die beiden Grenadiere
Die feindlichen Brüder
Loreley
Der arme Peter
Ich wandre nicht

Dichterliebe
A Poet's Love

Im wunderschönen Monat Mai
Aus meinen Tränen spriessen
Die Rose, die Lilie
Wenn ich in deine Augen seh
Ich will meine Seele tauchen
Im Rhein, im heiligen Strome
Iche grolle nicht
Und wüssten's die Blumen
Das ist ein Flöten und Geigen
Hör' ich das Liedchen klingen
Ein Jüngling liebt ein Mädchen
Am leuchtendem Sommermorgen
Ich hab' im Traum geweinet
Allnächtlich im Traume
Aus alten Märchen winkt es
Die alten, bösen Lieder

Liederkreis von Eichendorff
Song cycle with words by Eichendorff

In der Fremde
Intermezzo
Waldesgespräch
Die Stille
Mondnacht
Schöne Fremde
Auf einer Burg
In der Fremde
Wehmut Zwielicht
Im Walde
Frühlingsnacht

Der Knabe mit dem Wunderhorn
Der Page
Der Hidalgo

Die Löwenbraut

Die Kartenlegerin

Die rote Hanne

I, however, did not have these kinds of pre-existing visual tools at my disposal. Therefore, it was Galloway's other approaches to depicting music in which I took a keener interest—the ones that focused on representing music within language.

Throughout the novel, rather than trying to re-create a sense of what the music *sounds* like—what the auditory experience of *hearing* it is—Galloway focuses her attention on trying to capture a sense of music's *effect* on its listener instead. Music is not only heard, but also felt. Sometimes these feelings are literal, physical sensations: 'all day, the music rises. […]

she can feel it buzz beneath the soles of her canvas shoes. Music makes sensation, it vibrates along the bones' (Galloway, 16). More often, however, music's effects are less literal, more ephemeral and emotional. Music is described as stirring feelings of 'rage and wonder and soul-grinding sorrow; pleasure and peace' (Galloway, 144). Clara's impression of hearing another musician play is described at one point as being 'something healing; almost, Clara thought, sacred' (Galloway, 359). These descriptions give readers an idea of the core emotional reaction that music produces, but no real sense of what the music itself is like.

That being said, Galloway frequently attempts to capture the essence of what a particular piece of music is *like* in addition to how it makes an observer *feel*:

> *In the Style of a Legend*, he had written. It was how it began. And it was music anyone would call mystical, strange. The thick chord clusters, suspensions pedalled over shimmers of running semiquavers, gave it something of the timeless. […] the march, the coda. So many leaps! And this perfect melody, its handful of spread chords! It made her run hot and cold at once to play it, even to see it on the page. Its demands were fierce, but its result was sublime. (Galloway, 170-1; original emphasis)

Here, Galloway includes technical details that mean something to those familiar with music and its forms: the song contains 'chord clusters' (tone clusters), pedalled 'suspensions', 'semiqauvers' (sixteenth notes), a 'coda' and 'spread chords'. However, the reader's sense for the feel of the song—the sensations it stirs and evokes, its overall impression upon a listener—comes across more readily in the other descriptors Galloway pairs with these technical details. Opening with the phrase in the '*Style of a Legend*' creates connotations that evoke images of things epic and romantic—mythic journeys and heroic sagas, fantastic adventures filled with portents and mysterious happenings. These images are given further shape with the additional descriptors 'mystical', 'strange', and 'timeless'. Even the phrase 'shimmers of running semiquavers' stirs a more specific gut reaction than a more neutral description like 'groupings of sixteenth notes' would. And even though individual readers will have different interpretations of what all these descriptors combined amount to, this is not

a weakness in Galloway's representational technique—quite the opposite. It is a strength, one that more closely aligns her representation of music to the actual reality of experiencing a particular musical work. After all, in my experience, no two people come away from listening to a symphony with the exact same impressions and responses.

Sometimes, though not always, specific images or metaphors are included in Galloway's descriptions of particular musical compositions:

> These pieces, he said, the *Papillons*, they are not really butterflies. Not at all. They are a masque, a ball, he said […] That understood, she might think of handsome people dancing if she chose, but to produce the *feeling* of a ball, nothing literal. The right-hand octaves in the third fragment should *glide*. A giant boot, he said, she might think of the octaves in exactly that way — a giant boot *gliding* in F# minor. She asked if she should fade the dominant seventh chord at the close, let it melt to nothing. He only smiled. […] She would know what to do when the time came. (Galloway, 102; original emphasis)

Here, again, Galloway uses a combination of technical terms and additional descriptions in order to represent a particular piece of music. However, in this example, unlike the previous one, she includes specific images which the music supposedly evokes—'a masque', 'a ball', 'a giant boot'. These images provide contextual clues for readers to cling to, helping them get a better sense of the music. And yet, a sense of mystery, of indeterminacy, still remains. The juxtaposition of the denied image of 'butterflies' positioned directly before the introduction of the more appropriate imagery of 'a masque, a ball' creates an interesting tension, stirring a question in the reader's mind as to how the one could possibly be mistaken for the other. The music must, somehow, then, possess qualities of both butterflies and balls. Galloway provides clues to generate possibilities, but it is up to the reader's imagination to fill in the gaps. Moments like these, in which Galloway uses language to trigger the reader's imagination, are particularly effective in capturing the inherently ephemeral and interpretive nature of music.

Other Literary Depictions of Music

Throughout the novel *Clara*, Galloway uses language to allude to what music is like without ever attempting to define it literally. But Galloway is hardly alone in using this approach to depicting music in a literary work. Throughout literary history, other authors have approached representations of music in similar ways, creating evocative descriptive passages that trigger the imagination and generate substantial reader responses. A particularly well-known example of such a descriptive passage can be found in E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*. Although music does not play an important thematic part in the novel as a whole, the description of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in the fifth chapter is particularly vivid:

> the music started with a goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end. Others followed him. They were not aggressive creatures; it was that that made them so terrible to Helen. They merely observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world. After the interlude of elephants dancing, they returned and made the observation for the second time. Helen could not contradict them, for, once at all events, she had felt the same, and had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! The goblins were right.
>
> Her brother raised his finger: it was the transitional passage on the drum.
>
> For, as if things were going too far, Beethoven took hold of the goblins and made them do what he wanted. He appeared in person. He gave them a little push, and they began to walk in a major key instead of in a minor, and then—he blew with his mouth and they were scattered! Gusts of splendour, gods and demi-gods contending with vast swords, colour and fragrance broadcast on the field of battle, magnificent victory, magnificent death! Oh, it all burst before the girl, and she even stretched out her gloved hands as if it was tangible. Any fate was titanic; any contest desirable; conqueror and conquered would alike be applauded by the angels of the utmost stars.
>
> And the goblins—they had not really been there at all? They were only the phantoms of cowardice and unbelief? One healthy human impulse would dispel them? Men like the Wilcoxes, or President Roosevelt, would say yes. Beethoven knew better. The goblins really had been there. They might return—and they did. It was as if the splendour of life might boil over and waste to steam and froth. In its dissolution one heard the terrible, ominous note, and a goblin, with increased malignity, walked quietly over the universe from end to end. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! Even the flaming ramparts of the world might fall.
>
> Beethoven chose to make all right in the end. He built the rampart up. He blew with his mouth for the second time, and again the goblins were scattered. He brought back the

> gusts of splendour, the heroism, the youth, the magnificence of life and of death, and, amid vast roarings of superhuman joy, he led his Fifth Symphony to its conclusion.[15]

Forster's depiction is vividly evocative, reflecting an interpretation of Beethoven's Symphony from a particular viewpoint—Helen's. Helen's impressions of Beethoven's music are undoubtedly shaped by her personality, and Forster's descriptions reflect that. Barely of age, on the cusp of adulthood, Helen's current preoccupations and anxieties filter into her impressions of the music—her own feelings of '[p]anic and emptiness!', her disillusionment now that 'the reliable walls of youth' have 'collapse[d]' reflected in her fear that there is 'no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world'. And yet, although these things weigh heavily on her, Helen is still an idealistic dreamer at heart and her impression of the symphony reflects that too—in images of 'gusts of splendour', 'angels of the utmost stars' and goblins being 'scattered'. Even though the threat of the goblins 'might return', the Symphony concludes with everything being 'all right', with the 'magnificence of life' and 'superhuman joy'.

Forster knows this is not Beethoven as *everyone* experiences it, but it is Beethoven as *Helen* experiences it. His use of 'goblin' imagery and other figurative language serves to provide insight into Helen's psyche, as well as serving the dual purpose of meeting the challenge of needing to represent, in a text-based medium, the actual experience of listening to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The imagery employed by Forster is far more specifically detailed than any of the imagery Galloway uses to describe music in her work, yet it serves a similar purpose, triggering the reader's imagination in order to produce a simulacrum of the music without attempting to describe it literally.

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[15] E. M. Forster, *Howard's End* (London: Edward Arnold, 1901; repr. New York: Bantam, 2007), pp. 34-5.

Falling somewhere between Forster and Galloway's approaches in terms of image-based specificity, Patrick Rothfuss is also frequently faced with the challenge of needing to depict music in the first two books of his Kingkiller Chronicles. Rothfuss's approach, however, tends to focus on the deep, almost sacred or spiritual, sense of connection a musician feels for music:

> I made a simple chord and strummed it. It rang soft and true. I moved a finger and the chord went minor in a way that always sounded to me as if the lute were saying *sad*. I moved my hands again and the lute made two chords whispering against each other. Then, without realising what I was doing. I began to play.
>
> The strings felt strange against my fingers, like reunited friends who have forgotten what they have in common. I played soft and slow, sending notes no farther than the circle of our firelight. Fingers and strings made a careful conversation, as if their dance described the lines of an infatuation.
>
> Then I felt something inside me break and music begin to pour out into the quiet. My fingers danced; intricate and quick they spun something gossamer and tremulous into the circle of light our fire had made. The music moved like a spiderweb stirred by a gentle breath, it changed like a leaf twisting as it falls to the ground, and it felt like three years Waterside in Tarbean, with a hollowness inside you and hands that ached from the bitter cold.[16]

Rothfuss embeds a sense of give and take in his description here between the music and the musician making it, blurring lines of identity and authority. The music has its own identity, separate from the musician, Kvothe—it is something 'gossamer and tremulous […] like a spiderweb stirred by a gentle breath'. But it is brought to life out of the 'conversation' between Kvothe's fingers and the lute strings and it only becomes *music*—rather than a series of changing 'notes'—*after* Kvothe feels something 'break' inside him. Moreover, the song that is produced contains Kvothe's own 'hollowness' and *feels* like 'three years' of his life.

[16] Patrick Rothfuss, *The Name of the Wind* (London: Gollancz, 2007), p. 220; original emphasis. Subsequent references will be given in the text as '*NotW*', followed by page number.

At its most potent, Rothfuss portrays the connection between music and musician as being one without any sense of barrier or separation, where individual identity is entirely stripped away and music and musician become one:

> I was so deeply in the music that I couldn't have told you where it stopped and my blood began. […] I forgot everything except finishing […] the song that was burning out of me.
>
> And then it was done. Raising my head to look at the room was like breaking the surface of the water for air. I came back to myself, found my hand bleeding and my body covered in sweat. Then the ending of the song struck me like a fist in my chest, as it always does, no matter where or when I listen to it.
>
> I buried my face in my hands and wept. Not for a broken lute string and the chance of failure. Not for blood shed and a wounded hand. I did not even cry for the boy who had learned to play a lute with six strings in the forest years ago. […] for love lost and found and lost again, at cruel fate and man's folly. And so, for a while, I was lost in grief and knew nothing. (*NotW*, 369-70)

Kvothe loses himself so completely in the music that he continues to feel its aftereffects echoing, reverberating in his soul long after the physical act of playing the song has finished. The reader is moved by the intensity of Kvothe's reaction and, yet, Rothfuss has given only the barest description of the song itself. Briefly, before Kvothe gets swept away in the music's inexorable tide, Rothfuss does mention that the song is a duet of two voices: 'Savien sang solid, powerful lines, like branches of a rock-old oak, all the while Aloine was a nightingale, moving in darting circles around the proud limbs of it' (*NotW*, 368). However, this description does not give a true accounting of the song's obvious breadth and scope, does not do as much to illicit a reaction as the knowledge that Kvothe wept 'for love lost and found and lost again, at cruel fate and man's folly'. The reader experiences the power of the music through Kvothe's experience of it rather than through the music itself. This is frequently the approach Rothfuss uses when depicting music in both *The Name of the Wind* and its sequel *The Wise Man's Fear*.

When he does choose to describe particular pieces of music, Rothfuss does so sparingly, without the use of a lot of figurative language or detail, using phrases that cut right to the heart of the matter:

> it is a song that sounds like weeping. It is music that speaks of empty rooms and a chill bed and the loss of love. […]
>
> Then I played the song that hides in the center of me. That wordless music that moves through the secret places in my heart. I played it carefully, strumming it slow and low into the dark stillness of the night. I would like to say it is a happy song, that it is sweet and bright, but it is not.[17]

There is an evocative power and an effectiveness in the combinations of these seemingly simple phrases. What is particularly effective is Rothfuss's use of juxtaposition: the first song is delineated by descriptions of what it is, the second by what it is not. While each reader will have different impressions of what the individual songs may *sound* like, the kinds of sensations they evoke are clear. Furthermore, Rothfuss uses music here as a means of giving insight into the very heart of Kvothe's character—that there is a terrible tension between the kind of person he wishes he were and the kind of person that he is.

Even more so than in Galloway, Forster, or Rothfuss's works, Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* focuses on the way music can be used as a means of interrogating identity. *Trumpet* is a story about 'private life that turns suddenly and horrifically public'—a nonlinear narrative constructing the life story of fictional transgender jazz musician Joss Moody after his death, primarily through the memories of those who knew him.[18] As such, music plays a pivotal role in the narrative. Moreover, Kay's use of language throughout the novel borrows directly from traditional jazz music forms—the 'fragmentary structure of the text' a direct result of her

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[17] Patrick Rothfuss, *The Wise Man's Fear* (New York: Daw Books, 2011), p. 888.

[18] Jackie Kay, *Trumpet* (London: Picador, 1998; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 169. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Kay', followed by page number.

'adapting the rhythms of jazz music to the internal structure' of her narrative form.[19] In many ways, the novel as a whole reads like one long piece of jazz music. This is intentional, linked to the notion that 'identity within jazz is very fluid' and that jazz 'is a process' of 'constantly reinventing itself' while the novel works to investigate the ways people create identities—'the fluidity of identity and how it is not static'.[20]

Given that music in *Trumpet* is used as a means of interrogating identity, Kay's depictions of the subject tend to focus on music's affective nature rather than on an attempt to describe the music itself:

> When the sax starts Joss closes his eyes and keeps them closed for the longest time. I find this bit embarrassing. I feel as if I've lost him, that he belongs to the music and not to me. Other people shout out, little words of intense pleasure — 'Yeah!' Clap their hands. Stomp their feet. […] I wonder whether I will ever let myself go enough to put on that serious jazz face, pouting my lips and shaking my head in tight syncopated movements.
>
> The music changes. The sax is slow and sad, like it is trying to remember something lost. I try tapping my foot in time to the soft shoe shuffle of the drum. At first I feel self-conscious. I'm not sure that my foot tapping looks like the other tapping feet. I'm not sure I've got it right. I know I can't risk shaking my head, twitching my face or conducting with my hand. But this quiet tapping feels fine. After a while I don't even notice myself doing it. I have gone inside the music. It's a strange feeling, but there it is waiting for me. I am sitting in the middle of the long slow moan of the sax, right inside it. I feel something in me go soft, give in. (Kay, 17-8)

At first, the narrator, Moody's wife Millie, is resistant to the music; she feels it forms a barrier between herself and the person she loves. Music is a part of Joss's life Millie feels she cannot touch, cannot understand, and her resistance to it is reflected in Kay's construction of the text. The reader is given no indication of what the music sounds like in the opening description, only details about how it affects the people listening to it. Still, their reactions provide some insight into what the music must sound like; if those listening are clapping and stomping their

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[19] Carla Rodríguez González, 'Biological Improvisation in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*', *Scottish Studies Review*, 8.1 (2007), 88-100 (p. 88).

[20] Maya Jaggi and Richard Dyer, 'Interview: Jackie Kay in Conversation', *Wasafiri*, 14.29 (1999), 53-61 (p. 55; 53).

feet, it is most likely an upbeat kind of song. And yet, that is far less important than the fact that Millie feels like an outsider in this audience. But, when she starts to consider letting go, of allowing herself to really give in to the music, Kay's depiction of the situation changes as well, reflecting the internal shift in Millie. The music changes, and the reader is actually given a glimpse of what it sounds like for the first time—the 'sax is slow and sad, like it is trying to remember something lost'. Still, Millie resists letting go completely and Kay reflects this tension in her language usage, again focusing on describing Millie's physical actions rather than the music itself. Even when Millie finally decides to give in completely, when she goes 'inside the music', Kay chooses to emphasise what this means for Millie and Joss's relationship, rather than trying to describe the music: 'I feel something in me go soft, give in. I look over at Joss and find him staring at me. He's seen it all happening. He looks right through me' (Kay, 18).

Throughout *Trumpet*, music is used as a means of interrogating identity. Music is important, not because of how it sounds, but because of what it represents both to those for whom music is their entire life—like Joss Moody—and those for whom music plays a much smaller role—like Joss's wife and son. The most powerful example of the way music is directly linked to identity can be found in the single chapter given from Joss's point of view. He is dead and yet his spirit speaks from beyond the grave—effectively, Kay implies, because his deep connection to music keeps some part of his spirit alive even after he physically dies: '[t]he face of his own undertaker scares him the most. […] Death hath ten thousand several doors for men to take their exit. He leans out of the music and calls out, "See you later"' (Kay, 133). The chapter as a whole, however, explores the blurred boundary between where Joss ends and music begins; in his music, Joss becomes simultaneously less himself, more than himself, and more himself:

> When he gets down, and he doesn't always get down deep enough, he loses his sex, his race, his memory. […] Getting there is painful. He has to get to the centre of a whirlwind, screw balling in musical circles till he is very nearly out of his mind. […]
>
> And he is bending in the wind, scooping pitch, growling. Mugging heavy or light. Never lying. Telling it like it is. Like it is. O-bop-she-bam. Running changes. Changes running faster, quicker, dangerous. A galloping piano behind him. Sweating like a horse. Break it down. Go on, break it down. It is all in the blood. Cooking. Back, from way. When he was something else. Somebody else. Her. That girl. The trumpet screams. He's hot. She's hot. He's hot. The whole room is hot. He plays his false fingers. Chokes his trumpet. He is naked. This is naked jazz. O-bop-she-bam. Never lying. Telling it like it is.
>
> […] He is the music. The blood dreaming. […] He could be the fourth horseman, the messenger, the sender. He could be the ferryman. The migrant. The dispossessed. He can't stop himself changing. Running changes. Changes running. He is changing all the time. […] All his self collapses — his idiosyncrasies, his personality, his ego, his sexuality, even, finally, his memory. All of it falls away like layers of skin unwrapping. He unwraps himself with his trumpet. […] He is […] Everything, nothing. He is sickness, health. The sun. The moon. Black, white. Nothing weighs him down. Not the past or the future. He hangs on to the high C and then he lets go. Screams. Lets it go. Bends his notes and bends his body. His whole body is bent over double. His trumpet pointing down at the floor then up at the sky. He plays another high C. He holds on. He just keeps blowing. He is blowing his story. His story is blowing in the wind. He lets it rip. He tears himself apart. He explodes. Then he brings himself back. Slowly, slowly, piecing himself together. (Kay, 131-6)

Kay's use of language is musically evocative in and of itself—the simple, concise sentence structures made up of snippets and fragments, ideas of thoughts and half thoughts—mimicking jazz phrasing and forms. The repeated '[o]-bop-she-bam' reminiscent of a trumpet call, combined with descriptions that the 'trumpet screams', '[h]e plays his false fingers', '[h]e is blowing his story', creates a sense of ambiguity as to whether or not the rest of the language surrounding these phrases is actually supposed to be a song—the text a literal representation of its music. Regardless, what Kay makes abundantly clear is that Joss's story, the story of his life, is a song, at least metaphorically. Within the song, Joss is no longer defined by traditional labels; he 'loses his sex, his race, his memory' along with 'his idiosyncrasies, his personality, his ego', everything that supposedly makes a human being who and what they are. Within music, Joss 'strips himself bare, takes everything off, till he's

barely human' (Kay, 131). And then, what he is left with is an endless stream of possibilities. Becoming one with the music and within the music, Joss can and does become anything and everything and nothing all at once—'the fourth horseman, the messenger, the sender […] the ferryman. The migrant. The dispossessed. […] Everything, nothing'. In many ways, the process is entirely outside of Joss's conscious control—he 'can't stop himself changing'—and yet, there is a consciousness behind it as well—he is the one who 'tears himself apart' and he is also the one who '[s]lowly, slowly piec[es] himself [back] together'. What the text represents, overall, is Joss's attempts to come to terms with himself—a 'painful' process of looking deep down into the darkest, most hidden places within himself in order to determine not only who he already is, but also what he can be.

Jackie Kay's use of music and musicality as a means of interrogating identity was extremely influential in terms of informing my own work in *FACE the Music.* Frequently, music in my novel plays a similar role to the role it plays in *Trumpet*, its significance not in how the music itself sounds, but in how music and music-making plays an essential role in interrogating Natalie's own sense of self and personal identity. For instance, when Natalie plays '[u]p and down, backwards and forwards, sideways and slantways […] as though her life depend[s] on it', she is not focused on the sounds she is producing.[21] Instead, she is 'playing out' the 'things that [have] been weighing her down—[are] *still* weighing her down—her anger and frustration, her fear and denial, her anxiety, her loneliness, her depression' (Beyer, 252; original emphasis). Even though she imagines 'the pieces of her splintered psyche form[ing] the basis of a fragmented melody' as the 'echoes of a subtly forming symphony' come together in 'her mind's ear' (Beyer, 252), what is important about this symphony is not the particular notes and rhythms—the technical musical forms that are

[21] Anna Beyer, *FACE the Music*, pp. 251. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Beyer', followed by page number.

necessary to construct a literal symphony. What is important is the way that it is made up of all the component parts of Natalie's identity and, more importantly, a sense of wholeness within herself that she is slowly starting to come to terms with and understand more fully:

> She knew now, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she wasn't the same bright-eyed optimist she'd been when, as a girl, she'd plonked out her first few tremulous chords on her grandmother's dust-covered piano. She wasn't the same person she'd been when, as a teenager, she'd spent more weekends cooped up in her room with her instruments than out having fun with her friends. She wasn't the same woman who'd flourished at Juilliard, wasn't the same woman who'd floundered immediately afterwards. She wasn't even the same person she'd been when she'd so willingly given in to her parents' demands that she make this trip—desperate to avoid yet another confrontation or another, even larger, falling out.
>
> She was none of those people. But she was also all of them.
>
> She was the sum of her parts, and yet something more than the simple combination of those constituent parts. Something akin to music itself.
>
> Music—the thing that took a random combination of lines and circles scrawled across a blank page and transformed them into something beyond belief, transmuted them into something greater, something far more powerful, more moving than anything any one of those lines or circles could have ever imagined possible for themselves. (Beyer, 251-2)

Natalie's understanding of herself is being actively shaped by her relationship with and understanding of music.

As an additional complication, what I was most often attempting to depict within *FACE the Music* was not music, per se, but the act of musical composition. The character Clara reflects on this process herself in Galloway's *Clara*. According to her, composing is:

> Slowness, tedium. And from it, occasionally, very rarely, moments that turned into an hour or more, swallowed by one idea and its working out into a timeless state of self-forgetting. […] More often, there was the *stuckness* and the desire to be elsewhere, doing something else, anything rather than trying to force some order out of the random pieces that refused to go further without a fight. It was achieved despite her, somehow. Despite everything. (Galloway, 305; original emphasis)

It was this notion of slowness and tedium interspersed with moments of clarity that I attempted to represent in my own work using the recurring 'mnemonic devices of musicians' motif. I will discuss further in chapter four of this critical commentary the ways how this

motif functioned throughout the novel in terms of interrogating Natalie's identity; but, in terms of representing the act of composing, the repetitiveness of the single words and phrases was an intentional choice attempting to capture the sense of the '[s]lowness, tedium' and the inherent 'stuckness' that goes along with musical composition:

Fine Fine Fine Fine Fine

Every Fine

Every Every Fine Fine Every
Every Every Fine Every—
Boy

Boy

Boy

Boy Boy Boy Boy Boy Boy Boy Boy […] (Beyer, 76-7; original emphasis)

This repetitiveness is broken up by flashes of inspiration when the true music comes, represented by a new idea or set of words inserted in and interfering with the pre-established 'mnemonic devices' motif:

Every Good Boy Does Fine
Always
Good Boys Do Fine Always
Always
what About the Girls?

Girls Beg Demeaningly For Acceptance?
Always

teach A Girl music And she Automatically Assumes her place is Below the Boys
less important than their Cows
And the Grass they Consume (Beyer, 242; original emphasis)

However, in response to reader feedback that this technique was not as effective or evocative in terms of depicting music as it might be, I turned my attention back towards other examples of musical depictions in literature—such as those found in the works of Galloway, Forster,

Rothfuss, and Kay—incorporating some of their techniques into the sections of the novel where the focus is more on the music itself and not on Natalie's sense of self. For instance, I replaced a 'mnemonic devices' section entirely in chapter forty-one, focusing my attentions on describing the song Natalie composed for Gwyneth using other kinds of language instead:

> Her heartbeat married itself to the rhythm of the song, the gentle *allegretto* tempo. Her hands danced nimbly across the keys, echoing the playful give and take of the two complementary melodies she'd written into the first section. One was strong and steady, low resonant tones with roots that stretched deep, like a proud, majestic tree. The other melody wrapped itself around the first one, flitting and fleet, darting in and out of focus like a young carefree pixie child, frolicking in the sunlight underneath the tree's sheltering boughs, laughing in the face of danger. […]
>
> And then, the song shifted, changed. The first melody disappeared, leaving the second one bereft—lost and alone. Without the lower tones to anchor it, it was like a thing adrift, lost on the wind.
>
> The tempo slowed as the tension built. Natalie's fingers struck the keys with more force than before, seamlessly transitioning from the song's first motion into the next.
>
> Discord crept into the harmonies, jarring and a little unsettling. No more carefree pixie child. Darkness closing in. Disquiet settling in the gut, clawing at the heart. […]
>
> A brief flurry of chaos and confusion—waves crashing on tumultuous shores, lightning, thunder, a storm blowing inland from the west, wind howling through the hills at night. And then, finally, peace.
>
> The final lines, imbued with the warmth of the sun rising on a new day. Beams of bright, golden light filled with hope—with the promise that no matter how long the night lasted, the day would come to outshine it eventually. Or, at least, that's what Natalie hoped the music promised as the song faded away, the last few notes trilling lightly on the air—like the gentle twittering of birdsongs at dawn—before they too faded into the silence. (Beyer, 282-5)

Using techniques borrowed from my literary predecessors, I attempted to capture the sensations and feelings evoked by this song that Natalie wrote for Gwyneth within language. I include details to trigger the reader's imagination, through a combination of technical terms, imagery, and figurative language, providing an interpretation of the auditory experience that gives some sense of what the song is like—and how the experience of it impacts both the composer and her listener—but without attempting to give a literal description of the actual auditory experience.

Madness—Music's Kindred Spirit

Regardless of the approach, depictions of music in literature all seem to work towards the same end, attempting to recreate in language the ephemeral, transportive, and experiential quality inherent in music itself:

> experiences [of music] border on something irrational, ravishing, or provocatively fascinating. The power of music—beneficial or detrimental, from the mother's lullaby to the fascist broadcast—names music's undeniably strong influence, its overwhelming emotional force, its capacity to seize and overtake, its elemental energy difficult to master. The subject's loss of rational control in musical experience, the rise of unexpected passions or the sudden welling-up of tears, is hardly the province of a precise epoch or ethos but rather is a transcultural, transhistorical phenomenon. (Hamilton, 4)

Literary depictions of madness are similarly focused on attempting to describe, within language, something that is inherently 'irrational' and 'overwhelming' in 'its capacity to seize and overtake'. Like music, madness, as a generic construct, is elusive. It is 'a force outside our agency, tempering our judgement', a 'state of being […] that feels like nonbeing, a nothing state'.[22] Writing about madness, then, is the attempt 'to cause the incommunicable to communicate, to let the incomprehensible be comprehended' (Hamilton, 10). And yet, literary depictions of madness abound and there is not time or space in this critical commentary to even begin to give a proper accounting for the smallest fraction of them. My next chapter will look at the complex interrelated relationship between madness and creativity more generally, but here I will offer a brief analysis of two literary depictions of madness within works from other female writers who, like myself, were intimately acquainted with mental illness in their own lives and used their writings as a means of interrogating their own personal relationships with the specific forms of madness from which they suffered: Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath.

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[22] Ann Belford Ulanov, *Madness & Creativity*, ed. by David H. Rosen, Carolyn and Ernest Fay Series in Analytical Psychology, 18 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013), p. 9.

Literary Madness

Virginia Woolf was one of the most well-known and influential female writers of the twentieth century. According to literary scholar Nancy Topping Bazin:

> Her brilliance as a writer is seldom contested, and her place in the literary canon is assured. Whether interested in literary traditions, textual studies, applied feminism, or postmodern theory, most scholars and critics admire what she had to say and how she said it. […]. A principal area of scholarly discussion and controversy in recent years has centered, however, on what she and her husband, Leonard Woolf, referred to as her periods of 'madness'. These scholarly discussions have been characterised by imprecise use of language, difficulties stemming from the lack of real knowledge (as opposed to guesswork) […], and a desire to say the cause of her mental illness was predominantly this or that when it could have been any number of causes. Since no accurate diagnosis was made while she was alive […], the truth has probably slipped away. Therefore, it is important not to oversimplify and to admit that we can only speculate upon the various factors that caused her breakdowns, her suicide attempts, and finally her death.[23]

Bazin's discussion here highlights the difficulties inherent in attempting to retroactively assign specific medical diagnoses to artists after their deaths. These kinds of attempts 'betray the same kind of reductive patterning and self-generating evidence that any sort of labelling does, which inevitably ends in people telling or listening to only part of the story'.[24] Therefore, for the purposes of my analysis here, I will be avoiding any kind of assumptive labelling, intentionally choosing to discuss Virginia Woolf's 'madness' only in generic terms. Whether or not her madness was some form of 'the general label of "neurasthenia" applied by Woolf's doctors […] a manic-depressive illness as her husband, Leonard Woolf, initially claimed in his autobiography and then later denied in correspondence' or something else entirely, what cannot be denied is that Woolf claimed the madness label for herself many

[23] Nancy Topping Bazin, 'Postmortem Diagnoses of Virginia Woolf's "Madness": The Precarious Quest for Truth', in *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness*, ed. by Branimir M. Rieger (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), pp. 133-47 (p. 133). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Bazin', followed by page number.

[24] Susan M. Kenney and Edwin J. Kenney, Jr., 'Virginia Woolf and the Art of Madness', *The Massachusetts Review*, 23.1 (1982), 161-85 (p. 163).

times in her personal writings (Bazin, 135). In a journal entry from 1924, she actively reflects on her madness: 'I've had some very curious visions in this room too, lying in bed, *mad*, & seeing the sunlight quivering like gold water, on the wall. I've heard the voices of the dead here. And felt, through it all, exquisitely happy'.[25] Other references to her madness recur frequently throughout her diaries as well as in letters to friends and confidantes—'madness is terrific […] in its lava I still find most of the things I write about'—as well as in her suicide note—'I feel certain I am going mad again' (*Letters*, 180; Bell, 226). More often than not, however, Woolf found her experiences of madness far less than troublesome; frequently, she praised her madness as an inspiration for her work. For instance, in a journal entry from September 1929, she muses that 'these curious intervals in life—I've had many—are the most fruitful artistically—one becomes fertilised—think of my madness at Hogarth—and all the little illnesses—that before I wrote the *Lighthouse* for instance'.[26] Therefore, it is not surprising that themes of madness and the powerful emotional forces that intersect with it—grief, pain, ecstasy, trauma, melancholy, depression, etc.—often pervade Woolf's works.

One example of a work in which Woolf actively confronts madness head-on is her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf reflects on questions of what makes a madman mad and a sane man sane and whether or not society is always able to recognise and distinguish between the two. Although an argument could certainly be made that most, if not all, of the characters in the novel exhibit signs and/or similarities of mental states akin to or reflecting madness, for the purposes of this discussion, I will be focusing my attention specifically on Septimus Warren Smith, the character for whom Virginia Woolf claims the madness label explicitly rather than implicitly. Suffering from some kind of mental instability

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[25] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume Two: 1920-1924* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), p. 283; emphasis added.

[26] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1954; repr. New York: Harcourt, 2003), p. 143.

triggered, Woolf implies in the narrative, by his experiences serving in the First World War, today Septimus would likely be diagnosed with some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder. Regardless of his technical diagnosis, however, Septimus Warren Smith is a man irrevocably altered, changed in his mental instability from the man he once was. As his wife, Rezia, sees it, he has become a 'Septimus, who wasn't Septimus any longer'.[27]

Within his madness, Septimus dissociates from reality, experiencing the world differently from those around him. This is apparent from Woolf's first introduction of the character:

> Traffic accumulated. And there the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. (Woolf, 21)

While those around him witness a traffic jam—a fairly nonalarming nuisance, and their reactions reflect this—Septimus's own reaction far exceeds that which the situation demands. His response is entirely irrational, a reflection of his warped perception of reality. There is no danger that the world is about to 'burst into flames' but Septimus believes that it is with a certainty that triggers a concern bordering on panic, as Woolf's word choice conveys—words like 'horror', 'terrified', and 'threatened' connote the kind of danger that Septimus's response reflects. Later, when his wife is trying to get him to 'notice real things':

> "Look," she implored him, pointing at a little troop of boys carrying cricket stumps, and one shuffled, spun round on his heel and shuffled, as if he were acting a clown at the music hall. […]
>
> "Look," she repeated.
>
> Look the unseen bade him, the voice which now communicated with him who was the greatest of mankind, Septimus, lately taken from life to death, the Lord who had come to renew society, who lay like a coverlet, a snow blanket smitten only by the sun, for ever unwanted, suffering for ever, the scape-goat, the eternal sufferer, but he did not want it, he

[27] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925; repr. New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1985), p. 98. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Woolf', followed by page number.

> moaned, putting from him with a wave of his hand that eternal suffering, that eternal loneliness. (Woolf, 36-7)

Once again, a relatively normal, everyday occurrence has been warped, twisted and misinterpreted by the madness in Septimus's mind.

One symptom of Septimus's mad condition is that he hears voices. Sometimes these events arise naturally, based in actual auditory experiences in his environment, as when he begins to imagine that the birds are sending him a message, singing to him in Greek:

> A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on, drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words how there is no crime and, joined by another sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death. (Woolf, 35-6)

Other times, the voices appear to be entirely within his head, not triggered by external factors in his environment: 'he Septimus was alone, called forth […] to hear the truth, to learn the meaning, which now at last […] was to be given whole to…. "To whom?" he asked aloud. "To the Prime Minister," the voices which rustled above his head replied' (Woolf, 101-2). Septimus also has visions, sees things that are not really there—he 'saw faces laughing at him, calling him horrible disgusting names, from the walls, and hands pointing round the screen. Yet they were quite alone' (Woolf, 100-1). Frequently, he sees 'the dead' Evans, a close friend and superior officer killed in the war: '[a] man in grey was actually walking towards them. It was Evans!' (Woolf, 36; 105). However, the most common way in which Septimus's madness manifests itself throughout the course of his appearances in *Mrs. Dalloway* is in an overwhelming sense of paranoia:

> How Shakespeare loathed humanity—[…]! This was now revealed to Septimus; the message hidden in the beauty of the words. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair. Dante the same. Aeschylus (translated) the same. (Woolf, 133-4)

He sees conspiracy and cruelty everywhere, even in those who claim to be trying to help him:

> once they found the girl who did the room reading one of these papers [of Septimus's truths] in fits of laughter. […] that made Septimus cry out about human cruelty—how they tear each other to pieces. The fallen, he said, they tear to pieces. "Holmes is on us," he would say, and he would invent stories about Holmes; Holmes eating porridge; Holmes reading Shakespeare—making himself roar with laughter or rage, for Dr. Holmes seemed to stand for something horrible to him. "Human nature," he called him. (Woolf, 213)

This kind of paranoia seems strange, misplaced, and incomprehensible to his wife: 'Rezia could not understand him. Dr. Holmes was such a kind man. He was so interested in Septimus. He only wanted to help them' (Woolf, 139). These experiences begin after Evans's death, when Septimus begins to worry that '[h]e had not cared when Evans was killed', and this abnormal response to tragedy sends him spiralling into the earliest stages of his madness:

> now that it was all over, truce signed, and the dead buried, he had, especially in the evening these sudden thunder-claps of fear. He could not feel. […] Even taste […] had no relish to him. […] He looked at people outside; happy they seemed, collecting in the middle of the street, shouting, laughing, squabbling over nothing. But he could not taste, he could not feel. (Woolf, 137; 131-2)

Septimus feels himself an outsider, disconnected from the world and appropriate states of human emotion. Fears and doubts haunt him, eating away at him and escalating, eventually leading to a 'case of complete breakdown—complete physical and nervous breakdown', in other words, becoming a case of full blown 'madness' (Woolf, 144).

By the time of the day depicted in *Mrs. Dalloway*, his paranoia is no longer confined to concerns about himself and his own lack of emotion; instead, it extends into every aspect of his life, colouring and warping his views of reality. Moreover, the stream of consciousness narrative style which Woolf employs throughout the novel provides an excellent lens through which a reader is able to get a sense of what it is like to be living in Septimus's head even during the worst of his paranoid episodes:

> a Skye terrier snuffed his trousers and he started in an agony of fear. It was turning into a man! He could not watch it happen! It was horrible, terrible to see a dog become a man! At once the dog trotted away.
>
> Heaven […] spared him, pardoned his weakness. But what was the scientific explanation (for one must be scientific above all things)? Why could he see through bodies, see into the future when dogs will become men? It was the heat wave presumably, operating upon a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution. Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock. (Woolf, 102-3)

Here, Woolf gives readers a glimpse into Septimus's inner thoughts and feelings and, in doing so, toys with preconceived expectations of sanity and madness. Even in the deepest depths of his irrational madness, Septimus still retains some amount of lucidity and sanity. He is not entirely devoid of rational thought. He still believes that science holds the key to explaining the inexplicable in a way that logically will make everything make sense. In doing so, he reinforces the interpretation that there is some part of him that *knows* his current thoughts are inherently irrational and contrary to actual reality, even if it is only subconsciously. Somewhere, deep down, he knows that dogs cannot become men, and it is madness to believe that such a thing is possible. And yet he also believes, in his warped sense of reality in the moment, unconditionally, that such a thing is possible. Therefore, he looks to science—that bastion of logical thought and rational explanation—to rationalise what is inherently irrational in his current mindset. Even though his interpretation of science has been warped and twisted into pseudoscience at best, this does not take away from the fact that he still retains enough mental clarity to desire a logical, scientific explanation. Furthermore, Woolf intentionally draws attention to Septimus's desire to cling to science on multiple occasions throughout the text—repeated references that 'one must be scientific, above all scientific', 'one must be scientific above all, scientific' (Woolf, 32; 218). This further underlies the way that even in the depths of his paranoia and madness, there is something of the sane, the rational, lucid man that Septimus once was remaining inside of him. This is an important point that Woolf

appears to be making throughout the text in her depictions of Septimus—that madness is not an entirely hopeless experience that destroys every trace of human rationality and sanity. Instead, it is a human response, a reaction to a world that is inherently changeable, unstable, and outside the realm of humanity's control.

Moreover, the real thing that makes Septimus stand out as a madman instead of a sane one is that there is a distinct disconnect between his interpretation of the world and the interpretation of the world experienced by those around him. And yet, this is not a fixed thing. There are moments of lucidity and coherence even within Septimus's madness and at these times Septimus's madness looks almost like sanity. This is clear from his own stream of consciousness thoughts presented in the narrative, as well as his wife's observations of his condition. At times, Rezia despairs over the ways his perceptions of reality seem so twisted and false:

> she could stand it no longer. […] Far rather would she that he were dead! She could not sit beside him when he stared so and did not see her and made everything terrible; sky and tree, children playing, dragging carts, blowing whistles, falling down. All were terrible. (Woolf, 33)

In these moments, she is convinced he is mad: '[h]er husband, she said, was mad. He scarcely knew her' (Woolf, 141). Other times, Rezia almost feels as though the madness is something that can be contained, controlled: 'he could be happy when he chose […] going home he was perfectly quiet—perfectly reasonable' (Woolf, 100). Sometimes, Septimus seems so much more his former self that Rezia even finds herself imagining that he is better and that they might be able to return to some semblance of normality in their life together:

> he watched Rezia trimming the straw hat for Mrs. Peters […].
>
> "It's too small for Mrs. Peters," said Septimus.
>
> For the first time for days he was speaking as he used to do! Of course it was—absurdly small, she said. But Mrs. Peters had chosen it.
>
> He took it out of her hands. He said it was an organ grinder's monkey's hat.
>
> How it rejoiced her that! Not for weeks had they laughed like this together, poking fun privately like married people. (Woolf, 216-7)

And, even though Septimus is described as having 'hazel eyes which had that look of apprehension in them which makes complete strangers apprehensive too', outside observers do not automatically assume he is a madman (Woolf, 20). On passing, Peter Walsh does not see anything wrong with Septimus that strikes him as being at all out of the ordinary: 'that is being young, Peter Walsh thought as he passed them. To be having an awful scene—the poor girl looked absolutely desperate—in the middle of the morning' (Woolf, 106). Peter Walsh sees a mild lover's quarrel while Rezia is despairing, miserably 'unhappy' as she desperately tries to find some way to get through to Septimus and bring him back to reality (Woolf, 106). This raises an interesting point based on what has already been established about Septimus's madness. The main thing that differentiates Septimus from a sane man is that his interpretation of reality is different from other people's. And yet, Walsh's interpretation of reality differs from Rezia's here. Does that make him as mad as Septimus is? Does it make her? These kinds of questions and others like them Woolf seems to be intentionally raising in her narrative. After all, she even has the two doctors who attend Septimus render very different interpretations of his mad condition. Dr. Holmes, the doctor who attends Septimus for '[s]ix weeks' insists he has 'nothing whatever seriously the matter with him' he is just 'a little out of sorts' (Woolf, 144; 31). Whereas Sir William Bradshaw, the doctor who sees him for a mere 'three-quarters of an hour' believes something entirely to the contrary:

> he was certain directly he saw the man; it was a case of extreme gravity. It was a case of complete breakdown—complete physical and nervous breakdown, with every symptom in an advanced stage, he ascertained in two or three minutes […] (Woolf, 149; 144)

Surely two or three minutes is not enough time to render a proper diagnosis. And yet, Sir William's interpretation of events seems far more likely than Dr. Holmes's given Septimus's behaviour and mindset. Still, the tension between the two remains. And one thing is abundantly clear: Septimus's madness is a complex interweaving of many layers; it is not one thing but many, and, as such, it manifests itself in a variety of different ways.

Virginia Woolf uses Septimus's madness as an important thematic tool throughout *Mrs. Dalloway,* drawing attention to preconceived notions about sanity and madness and also raising important questions about where to draw the line between the two. Doubtless Woolf's own experiences with being 'mad' played a vital part in how she conceived and constructed this complex, multifaceted depiction of madness in her text.

Like Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath is another writer well-known for using her works as a means of interrogating her own tenuous relationship with her mental health. *The Bell Jar* is, perhaps, the most obvious example of that fact. A semi-autobiographical work of 'fiction', *The Bell Jar* is based upon Plath's 'own experiences of breakdown and recovery' and the central protagonist Esther's experiences with 'mental illness and treatment' bear far more than a passing resemblance to Plath's own.[28] As such, the novel, as a whole, explores the tenuous line that separates fiction from reality. Many Plath scholars have speculated that the work is actually autobiography masquerading as fiction—a conscious choice on Plath's part to draw 'attention to the *fiction* of the fiction':

> *The Bell Jar* was originally published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas and presented as a novel. However, the use of the term 'novel' for what is transparently an autobiographical discussion opens up questions about the boundaries between *genres* and Sylvia Plath's entirely knowing and self-conscious wish to subvert them. *The Bell Jar* (which was published in January 1963 only a few weeks before the author's suicide) challenges the idea (now widely discredited) that novels and autobiography are different, and that what can be said in fiction would not be acceptable in autobiography.[29]

But, regardless of why Plath chose to publish the work under a pseudonym, and even regardless of whether or not the work is more autobiography or fiction, what emerges thematically throughout *The Bell Jar* is that the protagonist's 'madness' stems from an

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[28] Luke Ferretter, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 44; 45.

[29] Mary Evans, 'Extending Autobiography: A Discussion of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*', in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, ed. by Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 76-88 (p. 76); original emphasis.

inability to reconcile the person she feels she is—and even more so the person she feels she *wants* to be—with her society's expectations of who and what women like her can and should be. Along with this inability to reconcile these conflicting ideals comes a sense of paralysis which eventually leads to Esther's mental breakdown, suicide attempt, and long road to recovery in a variety of mental institutions.

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath uses the figurative language to describe Esther's experience of madness throughout the novel. But, these figurative descriptions of Esther's suffering are relatively few and far between, chosen with care and precision, usually occurring at moments of significant import for Esther on her journey towards madness and back to wellness. For instance, when Esther first becomes aware that something must be 'wrong' with her upon the realisation that:

> I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolley-bus. […] I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo.[30]

Here, conflicting and paradoxical metaphors capture the sense of underlying confusion circulating in Esther's head. A trolly-bus is something that connotes vibrancy and energy, an open air chance to see new sights and sounds and, unlike taxis (which are frequently the mode of transportation used by Esther and her friends), trolley-buses provide a further chance to see and potentially interact with all kinds of fascinating new people. Moreover, people usually get on trolley-buses with a purpose in mind, a particular destination they need to get to. Esther's feelings of numb listlessness and lack of control seem particularly ill-suited for comparison with such a means of transportation. Similarly, a tornado is normally associated with its motion and violence, but Esther pinpoints the emptiness within the eye of the storm as where

[30] Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* ([n.p.], December 2019), p. 2. Kindle eBook. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Plath', followed by page number.

she sees herself fitting. Both metaphors speak to Esther's internal conflict, the way she feels like life is carrying on in all its animated vibrancy around her, but for some reason she just seems unable to touch it.

Throughout Esther's story, figurative phrases and metaphors like these filter into Plath's narrative descriptions, capturing the essence of Esther's experience with madness. Frequently, these descriptions are associated with specific circumstances that trigger Esther's feelings of inadequacy at being able to meet the expectations set for her. For instance, when facing the prospect that the 'era' of her life of 'winning scholarships and prizes' is 'coming to an end'—the 'one thing' she believes she is 'good at'—Esther finds herself feeling 'like a racehorse in a world without race-tracks' (Plath, 63). She feels lost, conflicted, without any clear path to follow. She knows she has many choices available to her, many paths she could choose, but she finds the idea paralysing:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story.
>
> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. […]
>
> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (Plath, 63-4)

In spite of having many possible futures, Esther feels trapped, hemmed in by societal expectations that will not allow her the option of being every version of herself she imagines and desires to be. Moreover, she cannot really conceive of any of these futures as actual possibilities, instead seeing them as 'figs' from a borrowed story. After all, the 'fig-tree' does not even really belong to Esther; it is someone else's metaphor, one Esther has taken from a short story she read about the thwarted, forbidden love between a 'Jewish man and a beautiful dark nun' (Plath, 45). Plath seems to be implying, albeit subtly, that Esther somehow sees her possible futures as nothing but borrowed pieces from the story of someone else's life too.

Here, the metaphor of the fig-tree serves to further emphasise Esther's feelings of dissociation from her own life as she starts spiralling closer to the point of breakdown.

But it is not only the pressure to make major life decisions that drives Esther's mental distress into the realm of metaphor. On a day out at the beach after she has already been toying with the idea of committing suicide, when she is forced to socialise although that is the last thing she feels like doing, Esther finds:

> Being with Jody and Mark and Cal was beginning to weigh on my nerves, like a dull wooden block on the strings of a piano. I was afraid that at any moment my control would snap, and I would start babbling about how I couldn't read and couldn't write and how I must be about the only person who had stayed awake for a solid month without dropping dead of exhaustion. […] The whole landscape—beach and headland and sea and rock—quavered in front of my eyes like a stage backcloth. I wondered at what point in space the silly, sham blue of sky turned black. (Plath, 129-30)

Here, Plath's use of figurative imagery subtly alludes to the progression of Esther's mental instability. Not only does Esther feel dissociated from herself as a living, breathing human being—as indicated by her likening herself to the thin, tightly-stretched, hard metal of piano wire—she feels the world dissociating from her as well. Her real life has taken on the qualities of something false and fake, something not quite believable, like a stage play. Esther feels that her world has become a stage—one on which she is expected, presumably, to perform—but she feels like a malfunctioning piano, about to 'snap' and ruin the 'performance'.

The one repeated metaphoric motif consistently associated with Esther's madness in the text is, of course, the recurring image of the 'bell jar'. The first time Esther conjures the image she is being transferred from a 'cramped city hospital ward' to 'a private hospital' with 'grounds and golf courses and gardens, like a country club' (Plath, 152). Her transfer is being paid for by an esteemed writer and Esther knows that there is a distinct disconnect in her brain between how she *should* be feeling and how she actually does:

> I knew I should be grateful to Mrs Guinea, only I couldn't feel a thing. If Mrs Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street cafe in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air. (Plath, 153)

Esther feels trapped in her own madness—her own lack of ability to 'fit' normally into the world—and she fears no mere change of location can help that, fears that she is doomed to be plagued by her own inadequacies for the rest of her life. Instead of blaming her circumstances for her problems, Esther blames herself. However, Plath uses the bell jar motif to imply that this interpretation of events may not be strictly accurate. After she experiences successful treatment with electroshock therapy at her new mental institution, Esther finds herself 'surprisingly at peace', feeling for the first time in a long time that '[t]he bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air' (Plath, 176). At this point, Esther is able to see her life from a clearer, more objective perspective. She realises that '[t]o the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream' (Plath, 194). More importantly, however, Esther begins to question whether she and the other institutionalised women are as abnormally different from everyone else in the world as she originally thought: '[w]hat was there about us, in Belsize [the asylum], so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in the college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort' (Plath, 195). Here, as in many other places in the text, Plath implies that Esther's struggles with madness are not solely her fault. They stem from her interactions with a much larger cultural context, a complex framework of social systems over which she has very little control. All women have bell jars hanging over them; they just take different forms.

These are but a few examples of the ways Plath uses figurative language and metaphor to convey Esther's experiences with her mental turmoil. However, as I mentioned previously, metaphoric imagery and figurative language are far from the only ways in which Plath depicts

Esther's madness in *The Bell Jar*. Very briefly, I want to address some of these other depictions as well.

Occasionally, within her madness, Esther experiences paranoia, similar it seems to the kinds of paranoia that plague Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*:

> I began to think they were testing me, to see if I noticed there were too many of them, and I grew wary. […] I thought he must be waiting to see when I would interrupt him and tell him I knew all that about rivers and Pilgrims was a lot of nonsense. But then I thought some of it might be true, so I tried to sort out what was likely to be true and what wasn't, only before I could do that, he had said good-bye. (Plath, 154)

Esther's instances of paranoia are generally linked to her interactions with doctors and nurses, stemming from her negative experiences with Doctor Gordon that taught her to be suspicious of those supposedly claiming to 'help' her:

> 'Suppose you try and tell me what you think is wrong.'
>
> I turned the words over suspiciously, like round, sea-polished pebbles that might suddenly put out a claw and change into something else. What did I *think* was wrong? That made it sound as if nothing was *really* wrong, I only thought it was wrong. (Plath, 107; original emphasis)

Most often, however, Esther's madness is depicted by feelings of listlessness and motionless numbness that speak directly to her sense of paralysis and inabilities to reconcile her sense of self with the roles she feels society makes available to women like her. Esther's madness is a kind of dissociation, an inability to connect with 'normal life' in what is thought of as the 'normal way'. This, naturally, manifests itself in an inability to do things and is frequently described as such in simple, direct language: 'I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react' (Plath, 2). Sometimes, Esther expresses feelings of frustration with her seeming lack of ability to function 'normally':

> After Doreen left, I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should any more. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired. (Plath, 24)

Other times, she just seems resigned to her inability to accomplish things:

> I gave it up.
>
> It was becoming more and more difficult for me to decide to do anything in those last days. And when I eventually did decide to do something, such as packing a suitcase, I only dragged all my grubby, expensive clothes out of the bureau and the closet and spread them on the chairs and the bed and the floor and then sat and stared at them utterly perplexed. (Plath, 86)

Still other times, she knows she *should* do something, or do it differently, and her brain generates the thought, but her body refuses to finish translating that thought into action:

> I wanted to tell her that if only something were wrong with my body it would be fine, I would rather have anything wrong with my body than something wrong with my head, but the idea seemed so involved and wearisome that I didn't say anything. I only burrowed down further in the bed. (Plath, 151)

Esther's madness is a kind of paralysis, a manifestation of her fears of her own powerlessness, a numbing inability to move forward with her life. And this is, of course, just what the figurative image of the bell jar represents, a kind of trappedness, a stuckness that, unless lifted, will slowly suffocate the woman confined inside.

This sense of paralysis conveyed in Plath's work is very similar to the kinds of depictions of 'stuckness' within mental illness that my own protagonist Natalie grapples with in *FACE the Music*. Although I, unlike Plath, made no attempts to write my own autobiographical account of my personal experiences with my chronic depression into my novel, I cannot deny that my experiences of living with depression have undoubtedly shaped my understandings of the disease and depictions of it within my work. Furthermore, *FACE the Music* ends with my central protagonist returning to her old life, ready to start over again. This ending bears a striking similarity to the ending of *The Bell Jar* in which Esther prepares to leave the mental institution. Whether or not Esther is able to successfully navigate her 'real life' in the 'real world' once again, however, is left to the reader's imagination. The novel ends before Esther ever gets there; Plath leaves her lingering fear, her question '[h]ow did I

know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?' unanswered (Plath, 198).

Searching for More Than Literary 'Madness'

Both Woolf and Plath very successfully use language to capture the mental and emotional turmoil of madness in their works. However, as in most literary representations of 'madness' dating from previous centuries, neither Plath nor Woolf ever attempts to give a definitive diagnosis to their 'mad' characters. This approach was one I actively sought to push back against in *FACE the Music*. Given that contemporary, twenty-first century understandings of mental disorders are increasingly focused on trying to add specificity to our comprehension of the ways different mental illnesses—like post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic depression, and bipolar disorder—manifest themselves and require different forms of treatment and coping mechanisms, the lack of specificity surrounding mad characters in the larger body of literature is potentially problematic. These kinds of depictions sometimes do no better than to perpetuate stereotypes that group any abnormal behavior and/or altered mental states under the single realm of 'madness'. This is not the case with either Plath or Woolf's works, which is why I chose to focus on them here in my discussion of literary madness. But it should be noted that 'madness' in both of their works is being used as a means to interrogate much larger societal constructs that extend far beyond the reach of the individual characters' mental instability—again, a frequently recurring theme in pre-twenty-first century literary depictions of madness. In *FACE the Music*, I am investigating a different side of madness—the individual torment of living with a chronic mental health condition. In this way, my own work bears more similarity to illness memoirs and autobiographical accounts than to previous literary depictions of 'madness' and 'altered mental states' on more general terms. I will address the ways this is reflected in my novel in more detail in chapter three. Before that,

however, I turn my attention back to the ‘mad artist’ stereotype, discussing other ways in which assuming all mental health conditions are interchangeable is an extremely problematic approach, one that undercuts our understanding of the fraught and complex nature of mental health conditions.

CHAPTER TWO: CREATIVITY AND THE 'MAD ARTIST' STEREOTYPE

Associations between creativity and madness are well established. Given the life stories of individuals like Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Schumann, it becomes all too easy to associate feats of artistic creativity with some measure of mental instability. As such, the idea of the tortured artist as a kind of 'mad genius' has become:

> a cherished cultural icon […], a romantic and compelling concept that helps demystify our geniuses and make them more accessible. […] The doctrine that great talent exacts a great price is so popular that few people think to question its validity.[31]

In other words, the idea that there must be some link between 'suffering and creativity has been firmly established in the popular psyche'.[32] Books, newspaper articles, blog entries, scientific and philosophical inquiries, and virtually every form of media reinforce this association.

Furthermore, widespread popular belief holds that the 'knowledge of a link between creativity and madness has persisted throughout history' (Glazer, 755). Contemporary discussions often trace the roots of the association back to ancient Greece. In the *Encyclopedia of Creativity*, the article dedicated to 'Mental Health: Affective Disorders' states, '[s]ince at least the time of the ancient Greek philosophers people have noted similarities between the activities of creative people, particularly artists, and the disordered behaviors of madness'.[33] Scientific inquiries into potential biological and/or psychological

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[31] Judith Schlesinger, 'Creative Mythconceptions: A Closer Look at the Evidence for the "Mad Genius" Hypothesis', *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 3.2 (2009), 62-72 (p. 62). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Schlesinger', followed by page number.

[32] Emma Simpkin, 'Tortured Artists, "Mad" Geniuses: Myths of Creativity and Mental Illness', *Villainesse*, (16 June 2015) <https://www.villainesse.com/culture/tortured-artists-mad-geniuses-myths-creativity-and-mental-illness> [accessed 3 Jan 2020] (para. 4 of 8).

[33] D Schuldberg, 'Mental Health: Affective Disorders', in *Encyclopedia of Creativity*, ed. by Mark A. Runco and Steven R. Pritzker, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (London: Elsevier, 2011), pp. 94-101 (p. 94). ProQuest Ebook.

explanation(s) of the connection make similar claims. For instance, '[t]he mad-genius controversy is certainly one of the oldest and most problematic issues in psychology […]. Ancient Greeks and Romans speculated on the possible connection between exceptional creativity and psychopathology'.[34]

However, what these discussions frequently fail to take into account is that the ancient Greeks did not actually associate 'exceptional creativity' with what is now considered 'psychopathology'. Rather, Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle *differentiated* between the type of madness that they associated with creativity and the kind of madness that, in the twenty-first century, is classed as psychopathology. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato makes this distinction explicit, taking great care to have the character of Socrates distinguish between 'two kinds of madness, the one caused by sicknesses of a human sort, the other coming about from a divinely caused reversal of our customary ways of behaving'.[35] The former is the kind of madness that today is associated with psychopathology; the latter is the kind associated with inspiration and creativity.[36] Aristotle is likewise understood to have made a similar distinction—'To Aristotle, the term "melancholia" was descriptive of a type of individual, the "homo melancholicus," who, depending upon the particular balance of his "humors," could *either* be a sane person of distinction *or* a madman'.[37] In ancient Greece,

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[34] Dean Keith Simonton, 'The Mad-Genius Paradox: Can Creative People be More Mentally Healthy But Highly Creative People More Mentally Ill?', *Perspectives of Psychological Science*, 9.5 (2014), 470-80 (p. 470). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Simonton', followed by page number.

[35] Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. by C.J. Rowe (Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips, 1986), p. 101.

[36] In ancient Greece, inspiration and creativity were usually understood to be divinely inspired. See, for example, Plato's works *Phaedrus* and *Ion*, Yulia Ustinova's book *Divine Mania: Alteration of Consciousness in Ancient Greece* (Routledge, 2017), or J Dacey's entry 'Historical Conceptions of Creativity' in the 2011 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Creativity* (pp. 608-16).

[37] G Becker, 'Mad Genius Controversy', in *Encyclopedia of Creativity*, ed. by Mark A. Runco and Steven R. Pritzker, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (London: Elsevier, 2011), pp. 69-74 (p. 70). ProQuest Ebook; emphasis added. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Becker', followed by page number.

individuals were seen as being *either* sane and creative *or* mentally unstable and in need of some kind of medical intervention; the two were not viewed as two sides of the same coin.

In fact, most of the available evidence suggests that 'the association of creativity with *clinical madness* is a modern phenomenon that does not predate the 1830s' (Becker, 69; emphasis added). The idea that 'creativity and psychopathology are inextricably linked' is actually a Romantic, not an ancient, notion .[38] It was not until the nineteenth century that several prominent authors:

> shifted the inquiry into art and artists from philosophical speculations to medical research and, though misapprehending the Aristotelian concept of the 'mad' and 'melancholic' genius, [gave] the old tradition of the link between genius and abnormal psychological conditions a pseudo-scientific basis. (Wittkower, 287)

For the first time, science, rather than inference and anecdotal conjecture, became a basis to perpetuate the stereotype.

The idea that science could somehow explain the link between creativity and mental illness was a commonly accepted rationale in the twentieth century; indeed it holds much weight to this day. Some even claim that scientific studies have provided irrefutable evidence of links between the two.[39] However, such 'proof' tends to rely on studies with questionable authenticity and merit.

To make matters even more complicated, 'most of the supposed scientific evidence of creative vulnerability derives from the work of just three people': a study published by Nancy Andreasen in 1987, Kay Redfield Jamison's 1989 study and 1993 work *Touched with Fire*, and Arnold Ludwig's 1995 work *The Price of Greatness: Resolving the Creativity and*

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[38] Arline Kaplan, 'Creativity and Mental Illness', *Psychiatric Times*, 31.4 (17 April 2014), <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/neuropsychiatry/creativity-and-mental-illness> [accessed 12 January 2020] (p. 1 of 3). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Kaplan', followed by page number.

[39] Edward Hare, 'Creativity and Mental Illness', *British Medical Journal (Clinical Research Edition)*, 295.6613 (Dec 1987), 1587-9 (p. 1587).

Madness Controversy (Schlesinger, 63). The methodologies employed by both Jamison and Andreasen are questionable at best.[40] And yet '[b]oth of these studies have been consistently discussed in popular as well as professional publications as having proven a connection between affective illness—depression, mania, or both together—and creativity'.[41] This is in spite of the fact that Andreasen's study only examined thirty 'creative' individuals and Jamison's only forty-seven (Rothenberg, 150; Schlesinger, 65). The results from such limited sample sizes can hardly be considered conclusive. However, because the results appear to confirm a popular perception already firmly ingrained in the cultural imagination, they are too often referenced as incontrovertible proof of a scientifically proven association between creativity and psychopathology—in spite of a growing accumulation of contradictory evidence put forth by other researchers.

In 1990, Albert Rothenberg, a clinical professor of Psychiatry at Harvard University, published a book entitled *Creativity & Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes*. This work was his attempt to determine whether or not psychosis and outstanding creativity really could co-exist in the same individual. Far from supporting that these two processes co-exist, much less that they are inexorably intertwined, this seminal work presents an opposing viewpoint. Rothenberg found '[a]ll types of mental illness engender anxiety that tends to disrupt creative functioning' (Rothenberg, 164). He concluded from his research that '[e]motional and mental illness is a decided hindrance to creativity for persons working in artistic, scientific, and other conventionally designated creative fields. It impedes […] creative operations and functions' (Rothenberg, 180).

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[40] For more details on the potentially problematic designs of these studies, see Chapter 12 'Creativity and Mental Illness' in Albert Rothenberg's *Creativity and Madness* (pp. 149-64) and Judith Schlesinger's article 'Creative Mythconceptions'.

[41] Albert Rothenberg, *Creativity & Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 150. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Rothenberg', followed by page number.

Although, at the time his work was published, Rothenberg's was one of the only voices dissenting from the conventional linkage of madness and creativity, his book set a new precedent in the field of creativity research. He demonstrated that the 'popular notions about creativity' were still, in many ways, based more in myth than on fact, and that they had '*not* been empirically assessed or substantiated' (Rothenberg, 3; original emphasis). As such, his work re-opened debate, demanding further scrutiny into the association and paving the way for much of the research that has occurred in the past thirty years.

Unfortunately, even with the increased demand for more thorough and rigorous research, a consensus has yet to be reached. In fact, far from it: scholars in '[r]ecent books and reviews have taken bold and sometimes contradictory positions, such as that creativity and mental illness are absolutely unrelated (Schlesinger, 2009), basically unrelated (Sawyer, 2006; Weisberg, 2006), or deeply entwined (Kottler, 2005; Nettle, 2002)'.[42] Partially, this is due to the complex nature of the concepts in question. Separately, both creativity and madness are difficult to define in explicit terms. Put them together, and the problematic nature of their combined lack of established definitions increases exponentially.

Researchers have yet to agree on parameters to define either creativity or madness. Unfortunately, this critical commentary lacks space for a full account of the difficulties involved in trying to give a fixed, concrete definition to either 'creativity' or 'madness'. As such, what follows is merely a cursory overview of the most crucially significant complications.[43] Moreover, the conceptions discussed here will focus specifically on

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[42] Paul J. Silvia and James C. Kaufman, 'Creativity and Mental Illness', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity*, ed. by James C. Kaufman and Robert J. Sternberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 381-94 (p. 381).

[43] For more information surrounding conceptions of creativity see, for instance, Rob Pope's *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* (Routledge, 2005; particularly Chapter 3: 'Creating Definitions Theoretically', pp. 52-89), Aaron Kozbelt, Ronald A. Beghetto, and Mark A. Runco's chapter on 'Theories of Creativity' in *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity* (Cambridge University Press, 2010; pp. 20-47), and Arthur J. Cropley's article 'Definitions of Creativity' in the *Encyclopedia of Creativity* (2nd ed., Elsevier, 2011; pp. 358-68). For more on conceptions of madness, see works like

creativity in relation to the fine arts and forms of artistic expression directly linked to creative professions. Other conceptions of creativity exist—including ones much broader in definition, encompassing forms of 'everyday creativity' that apply to the sciences and virtually all other human industries as well as the arts—but these are omitted from the present discussion. This is in part due to limitations of space, but also due to the fact that these conceptions of creativity do not directly link to the 'mad artist' stereotype.[44]

That being said, conceptions of artistic creativity are an extremely broad category in and of themselves; they cover everything from a kind of 'inspired' creativity in which the artist is merely a vessel for some power greater than themselves—wielding no control over the source or the creative output being channelled through them—to more structured, rational approaches that see artistic creativity as 'nit-picking, intentional, problem-solving, an on-going series of adjustments to its material'.[46] In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, creativity is defined as '[t]he faculty of being creative; ability or power to create'.[47] This definition is a restatement of the obvious, far too simple and concise to clarify the controversial and much-debated construct. In the preface to *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity*, editors James C.

Richard J. McNally's *What is Mental Illness?* (Harvard University Press, 2011), *From Madness to Mental Health: Psychiatric Disorder and Its Treatment in Western Civilization* edited by Greg Eghigian (Rutgers University Press, 2009), Albert Rothenberg's *Creativity & Madness*, and Ann Belford Ulanov's *Madness & Creativity* (Texas A&M University Press, 2013).

[44] For more information on other conceptions of creativity, see, for example, *Everyday Creativity and New Views of Human Nature: Psychological, Social and Spiritual Perspectives* ed. by Ruth Richards (American Psychological Association, 2007) and R. Keith Sawyer's *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation* (2nd ed, Oxford University Press, 2012).

[46] Thomas Osborne, 'Rationality, Choice and Modernism: Notes on Jon Elster's Theory of Creativity', *Rationality and Society*, 23.2 (2011), 175-97 (p. 177). For further, more detailed discussions of this conception of creativity, see also Jon Elster's other works, particularly *Ulysses Unbound* (Cambridge University Press, 2000; especially Part III—'Less is More: Creativity and Constraint in the Arts') and *Explaining Technical Change* (Cambridge University Press, 1983). For more information on 'inspired' forms of creativity see, for example, Timothy Clark's *The Theory of Inspiration* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

[47] 'creativity, n', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press (December 2019) <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/ 44075?redirectedFrom=creativity#eid> [accessed 20 February 2020].

Kaufman and Robert J. Sternberg do a little better, claiming to distil the essence of creativity down to three key components:

> First, creative ideas must represent something different, new, or innovative. Second, creative ideas are of high quality. Third, creative ideas must also be appropriate to the task at hand or some redefinition of that task. Thus, a creative response in novel, good, and relevant.[48]

Still, this definition is amorphous at best. There are many permutations and potential interpretations that apply to each of the components. Besides, this definition does not really define the concept of creativity itself, but rather 'creative ideas' which form only one aspect of the creative process. Yet, in many ways, this is as close to a coherent definition as is currently available.

Researchers are well aware that a precise consensus has yet to be reached, and increasingly call for more specificity in defining the parameters for scientific examinations—particularly in inquiries relating to creativity's potential links with psychopathology:

> The field of creativity and madness research should examine the issues within the context of the underlying nature of the creativity construct. Theorists have failed to address this, yet the establishment of a universal definition of creativity is vital to fully understand its association with mental illness. Whether different kinds of creativity exist, and if so whether they relate to distinct forms of psychopathology would have arresting implications for treatment of patients, education, and societal and cultural perceptions of creativity. (Glazer, 763)

All too often, discussions that aim to provide evidence linking creativity to mental illness fail to distinguish between different kinds of creative work and/or output. Painters, writers, musicians, actors, composers, dancers, etc. are usually all lumped into the single category of 'creative people' (Simonton, 471). This lack of distinction complicates matters by assuming that all forms of creativity are equivalent. Not only is there a lack of evidence to support this

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[48] James C. Kaufman and Robert J. Sternberg, 'Preface', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity*, ed. by James C. Kaufman and Robert J. Sternberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. xiii-v (p. xiii).

assumption, but anecdotal and observational evidence tends to refute such an interpretation of creativity. That a person has a talent for painting does not necessarily mean they would make a good composer, and vice versa. Vincent van Gogh and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart are not interchangeable, nor are their particular creative talents. Even if evidence seems to indicate that writers may disproportionately suffer from bipolar disorder compared to the rest of the population, such evidence is not enough to establish an indisputable positive correlation between creativity and psychopathology.[49]

Like creativity, madness, too, is an ill-defined, amorphous term. Though the term can be used to indicate real, diagnosable psychopathology, it can also refer to perceived oddness and eccentricities without any pathological basis that play into some stereotypical 'artistic persona'. Some scholars assert that artists themselves emphasise—or even *over*emphasise—these behaviours.[50] In doing so, they distinguish themselves as special, as 'a kind of being elevated above the rest of mankind' (Wittkower, 95). But, even when the term madness is used in reference to real, clinically diagnosable mental illness, this does not truly narrow the terms of the debate. 'Mental illness' is yet another multiplicitous term covering many things at once—including, but not limited to, generalised mood disorders, depression, bipolar disorder (manic depression), anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and addiction and substance use disorders.[51]

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[49] In the 1980s, both Kay Redfield Jamison and Nancy Andreasen captured the public imagination with this kind of 'evidence' that 'proved' a link between mental illness and creativity.

[50] For further discussions about the potential for this kind of behaviour from artists, see, for instance, Rudolf and Margot Wittkower's *Born Under Saturn*—particularly chapters four 'Eccentric Behaviour and Noble Manners' (pp. 67-97) and five 'Genius, Madness, and Melancholy' (pp. 98-132)—and also chapter seven 'Mental Illness and the Problem of Intentionality' starting with the subheading 'Art and Insanity' in Thomas Szasz's *Insanity: The Idea and Its Consequences* (Syracuse University Press, 1997, pp. 219-36).

[51] 'What is Mental Illness?', *American Psychiatric Association* <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness> [accessed 26 February 2020].

Researchers, however, still often treat both ‘creativity’ and ‘madness’ as fixed terms that can be discussed and evaluated as singular constructs, rather than the problematic and heterogeneous things they are. In trying to evaluate the authenticity of potential links between creativity and madness, should schizophrenic painters, bipolar writers, and depressed composers all be lumped into the same category and treated as one and the same?

Due to the complex nature of the terminology in question—encompassing many things which share similarities, but can hardly be considered ‘the same’ at an absolutist, indisputable level—it is difficult to determine whether perceived connections between creativity and psychopathology are actually proof of verifiable links between the two, or just coincidence. The nature of the causality between them is indeterminate, at best. Schlesinger presents the argument that:

> even if an irrefutable case can be made for artistic pathology, its relation to creativity still remains ambiguous. In discussing the alleged madness of musicians, including Schumann, psychiatrist William Frosch (1987) puts it this way:
>
> > Both major affective disease and compositional ability may occur in the same individual. The real question, however, is the nature of their interaction; whether the disorder is linked to musical ability, facilitates it, interferes with it, is irrelevant, or some combination of these. (p. 317)
>
> To date, this question remains open—not just because those threads are so difficult to untangle, but because, for so many people, “finding” talent and mental illness in the same person is enough to end the quest. (Schlesinger, 67-8)

Just because psychopathology and creativity happen to co-exist in some individuals is not proof that they *must* necessarily coincide. However, the notion that they do persists in common public perception, where insufficient evidence is too often espoused as unconditional confirmation. Though the evidence is in fact inconclusive, reporting on mental illness and creativity geared towards the general public skews toward highlighting a correlation between the two.

A BBC News article published in 2012 claimed in its headline that ‘[c]reativity is often part of a mental illness, with writers particularly susceptible, according to a study of

more than a million people'.[52] Four sentences later, the same article states, '[a]s a group, those in the creative professions were *no more likely* to suffer from psychiatric disorders than other people' (Roberts, para. 5 of 15; emphasis added). This contradictory information, presented as though it is confirmation of the 'mad artist' stereotype, demonstrates one of the many ways in which current discussions surrounding creativity and mental illness are framed to perpetuate the myth, rather than the more complex reality.

In spite of the complications that abound in trying to establish enough empirical evidence to either confirm or dispute the 'mad artist' stereotype, there is one area of consensus that has emerged in recent years, agreed upon by those on both sides of the debate. This is the idea that 'when mental disorder truly emerges, creativity *decreases*' (Guimón, xii; emphasis added). Even those who claim there are inarguable links between creativity and madness—that 'studies have confirmed that highly creative individuals experience major mood disorders more often than do other groups in the general population'—also acknowledge it is 'irresponsible to romanticize' mental illness because, 'untreated', these illnesses 'worse[n] over time—and no one is creative when severely depressed, psychotic or dead'.[53]

Perhaps, a certain level of mental instability does have benefits for creativity, and it can be said that '[a]rt has led the way in seeing mental illness not as alien or contemptible but part of the human condition'.[54] However, this does not necessarily make being mentally ill 'a

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[52] Michelle Roberts, 'Creativity "Closely Entwined with Mental Illness"', *BBC News Online*, 17 October 2012, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-19959565> [accessed 10 February 2020] (para. 1 of 15). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Roberts', followed by paragraph number.

[53] Kay Redfield Jamison, 'Manic-Depressive Illness and Creativity', *Scientific American*, 272.2 (February 1995), 62-7 (p. 66; 67).

[54] Jonathon Jones, 'A Short History of Mental Illness in Art', *The Guardian*, 13 January 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/christmas-charity-appeal-2014-blog/2015/jan/13/-sp-a-short-history-of-mental-illness-in-art> [accessed 10 February 2020] (para. 1 of 12). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Jones', followed by paragraph number.

positive and useful experience' (Jones, para. 1 of 12). Like any physical ailment, psychopathology is a real disease that can be debilitating, for creative individuals just as much as anyone else:

> creative individuals who have suffered from mood disorders find them to be disruptive and counterproductive. Among the writers in the Iowa Workshop study, essentially all of them reported that they were unable to work creatively during periods of depression or mania. During depressive episodes their cognitive fluency and energy were decreased, and during manic periods they were too distractible and disorganized to work effectively. Other writers also reported a similar inhibiting effect of mood disorder.[55]

The current consensus seems to confirm the claims Albert Rothenberg published in his controversial book *Creativity & Madness*. Contemporary research suggests 'no well-known creative output was produced in the thrall of overt psychosis, mania, or other mental state that could be pointed to as critical to the process' (Kaplan, 3). Mental illness is not a magical key that unlocks unlimited creative potential. Rather, the opposite is true. True psychopathology that emerges as 'full-blown mental illness is debilitating for creativity' (Glazer, 760).

This is the place where my work, *FACE the Music*, begins. My protagonist, Natalie, is a composer and musician who suffers from chronic depression. Rather than cultivating and supporting her artistic talents, her mental illness detracts significantly from her ability to create. At the beginning of the novel, Natalie's depression has deepened to the point that she cannot find it in herself to compose, and it has been months since she has had the heart to play any form of music at all. She is completely disconnected from her creativity:

> She hadn't really brought the oboe because she'd intended to play it. […] Though she hadn't been able to bring herself to admit it to anyone, not even her therapist, it had been close to six months since she'd been able to play anything at all—even longer since she'd composed something. […]
>
> She just wasn't inspired anymore. Music was too hard, too painful, […]. Lately, she'd started to worry that maybe her high school guidance counsellor had been right and she

[55] Nancy C. Andreasen, 'The Relationship Between Creativity and Mood Disorders', *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 10.2 (June 2008), 251-5 (p. 254).

> should have been focusing her efforts on trying to do something more practical with her life all along. (Beyer, 10-1)

Natalie's perceptions are warped, twisted by her debilitating case of chronic depression. The next chapter will explore this element of the novel in more detail, discussing the ways in which the work is an exploration of the interrelatedness between Natalie's creativity, her sense of self, and her struggles with chronic depression—the particular form of 'madness' from which she suffers.

CHAPTER THREE: DEPRESSION—A NARRATIVE NIGHTMARE

Depression, Not Mere 'Madness'

Aiming to interrogate the 'mad artist' stereotype in a way closely aligned to the experiences recorded by actual creatives suffering from mental illness, yet avoid condemning my protagonist to 'madwoman in the attic' status, I took care to explicitly locate the 'madness' of the central protagonist in *FACE the Music*.[57] Rather than being a woman suffering from some merely eluded to but never disclosed mental ailment, Natalie suffers specifically from depression. This is established early in the text:

> "Did he […] mention anything… anything about… my depression?" Natalie swallowed.
>
> "How do you mean?"
>
> "Well, did he tell you I was depressed?" Natalie said, confused by the question.
>
> "Your fiancé broke off your engagement and less than a week later you lost your job. Course you're depressed," Gwyneth said.
>
> "Right. Yeah."
>
> Natalie didn't press the issue. […], Gwyneth's nonchalance led Natalie to believe that her dad probably hadn't gone into any specific details about her mental health struggles when he was arranging things with her great aunt. And if he hadn't said anything, she certainly wasn't about to. In Natalie's experience, those kinds of conversations never went well. (Beyer, 21)

This exchange, from the novel's second chapter, implies that while Gwyneth may be somewhat dismissive of Natalie's condition, the protagonist's mental health struggles are

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[57] 'Madwoman in the attic' here refers to a recognised literary trope named after Bertha from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*—'the trope of the ridiculous, hysterical woman whose perspective is rendered null and void by her classification as "mad"'.* For more information, see works such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, 1979), Jane M. Ussher's *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), and the collection of essays edited by Annette Frederico published as *Gilbert and Gubar's 'The Madwoman in the Attic' after Thirty Years* (University of Missouri Press, 2009).

* Cait Findlay, '"The Madwoman in the Attic": Mental Health in Literature', *TCS* (9 May 2017) <https://www.tcs.cam.ac.uk/the-madwoman-in-the-attic-mental-health-in-literature/> [accessed 30 June 2020] (para. 2 of 5).

very real—extending beyond the realm of 'normal sadness' given her current circumstances.[58] Although at this point in the narrative Natalie does nothing to combat Gwyneth's misunderstanding about the nature of her mental distress, this short exchange serves to highlight several key complexities involved in attempting communication about mental health in general—and depression in particular—that the novel works to address. First, Gwyneth's 'nonchalance' about Natalie's depression is crucially linked to a fundamental misunderstanding of what being 'depressed' means in Natalie's case. After all, 'in common speech, the word *depression* itself applies equally to mild and passing sadness as it does to mental illness'.[59] Second, Natalie has attempted to have 'conversations' about her 'mental health struggles' before and they did not go well. This reference eludes to Natalie's personal experience with the stigmatisation that continues to go hand in hand with mental health disorders—a topic which I will examine in more detail later in this chapter.

Frequent references to Natalie's depression recur throughout *FACE the Music.* Natalie reflects on what her 'depressed mind' has been incapable of doing in the past; she refers to herself as a 'depressed person'; her father lumps her in with 'depressed individuals' and other 'depressed people' (Beyer, 46; 80; 248). These accumulating references serve to reinforce the narrative's active work to emphasise that 'a distinction [is being] made between normal sadness and clinical depression' (Gonzalez, 131). This is further confirmed in the text:

> "Didn't… didn't my dad explain things to you? I thought you said he told you I was depressed," Natalie said, eventually.
>
> Gwyneth looked thoughtful. "Well, he did say that. But he led me to believe that it was more to do with your current life circumstances—you know, the fact that you'd been

[58] Manny J. Gonzalez and Lisa G. Colarossi, 'Depression', in *Handbook of Social Work Practice with Vulnerable and Resilient Populations*, ed. by Alex Gitterman, 3rd edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 117-40 (p. 131). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Gonzalez', followed by page number.

[59] Kimberly K. Emmons, 'Depression, a Rhetorical Illness', in *Black Dogs and Blue Words: Depression and Gender in the Age of Self-Care* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp. 13-33 (pp. 25-6); original emphasis. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Emmons', followed by page number.

> laid off and your fiancé had left you, that sort of thing. I didn't realise you were *so* depressed. I mean, he said you were pretty down in the dumps about things, but I didn't think he thought it was anything serious. […] I'm beginning to understand that just being 'down in the dumps' doesn't really cover your state of mind, does it?"
>
> "Not really, no." Natalie sighed. "I have a clinical diagnosis from a respected psychiatrist in New York that claims it's more complicated than that."
>
> "How much more?"
>
> "Dunno." Natalie shrugged. "There's a lot of fancy words and jargon involved so that it sounds more impressive than it probably is. My psychiatrist says I'm a long-time sufferer from persistent depressive disorder—something called dysthymia—which has recently devolved, triggering several major depressive episodes. Apparently, I'm also at high risk for seasonal affective disorder, so there's that too." (Beyer, 184; original emphasis)

By providing a specific, clinical diagnosis for Natalie's condition, I hoped to eliminate some of the potential confusion surrounding the nature of the protagonist's suffering. However, due to the problematic and amorphous nature of depression itself, what I discovered was a myriad of other complications involved in trying to express, in narrative form, a kind of psychological distress that, in many ways, defies effective description.

Some Scientific Considerations

One of the major difficulties facing those who seek to address depression in contemporary discourse, regardless of field or discipline, lies in current conceptualisations of depression. 'Depression' is what is known as a 'heterogenous syndrome'.[60] This means '[a]ffected individuals vary markedly in their symptom profiles and response to treatment' (ten Have, 395). While it is common knowledge that the experience of depression, even when medically diagnosed, varies from person to person, it is less commonly understood that this is due to the nature of the condition itself. It is entirely possible that 'two individuals who qualify for a

[60] Margreet ten Have, Femke Lamers, Klass Wardenaar, Aartjan Beekman, Peter de Jonge, Saskia van Dorsselaer, Marlous Tuithof, Marloes Kleinjan and Ron de Graaf, 'The Identification of Symptom-based Subtypes of Depression: A Nationally Representative Cohort Study', *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 190 (2016), 395-406 (p. 395). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'ten Have', followed by page number.

diagnosis of MDD [Major Depressive Disorder] may not have a single symptom in common'.[61] This is true for Persistent Depressive Disorder (Dysthymia) as well. According to the current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-5*), the 'essential feature of persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia) is a depressed mood that occurs for most of the day, for more days than not, for at least 2 years'.[62] However, just as with Major Depressive Disorder, the symptomatology underlying a PDD diagnosis may vary dramatically from individual to individual. The key symptoms for diagnosis include:

> Presence, while depressed of two (or more) of the following:
> 1. Poor appetite or overeating.
> 2. Insomnia or hypersomnia.
> 3. Low energy or fatigue.
> 4. Low self-esteem.
> 5. Poor concentration or difficulty making decisions.
> 6. Feelings of hopelessness. (*DSM-5*, 168)

Any combination of these symptoms will result in the same clinical diagnosis. Yet, in all likelihood, the experiences of individual sufferers will significantly differ.

These complications make depression extremely difficult to write about cogently, even for those in medical or scientific fields. One of the only facets of depression that the scientific and medical communities agree about is that '[d]epression, as currently conceived, encompasses a broad range of mental and physical states'.[63] Thus, the current definition of depression is itself amorphous, lacking both clarity and coherence. According to Edmund S.

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[61] Eiko I. Fried and Randolph M. Nesse, 'Depression is Not a Consistent Syndrome: An Investigation of Unique Symptom Patterns in the STAR*D Study', *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 172 (2015), 96-102 (p. 97).

[62] American Psychiatric Association, 'Depressive Disorders', in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edn (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), pp. 155-88 (p. 169). Subsequent references will be given in the text as '*DSM*-5', followed by page number.

[63] Scott M. Monroe and Samantha F. Anderson, 'Depression: The Shroud of Heterogeneity', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24.3 (2015), 227-231 (p. 228). Subsequent references in the text will be given as 'Monroe', followed by page number.

Higgins and Mark S. George, authors of *The Neuroscience of Clinical Psychiatry: The Pathophysiology of Behavior and Mental Illness*:

> there are probably a multitude of discrete diseases that all end up with the syndrome we now call depression. For example, psychotic depression, atypical depression, bipolar depression, and pathological grief may be variants of the same phenomena or they could be different conditions with different mechanisms of action. We have no objective measures to distinguish between the depressive disorders at this time.[64]

This observation is echoed by nearly every other researcher in the field.

Yet, in spite of the absence of a coherent definition, contemporary research suggests '[m]ajor depression ranks fourth among disorders with the highest burden of disease worldwide, and it is expected to be ranked first in high-income countries by 2030'.[65] As such, there are growing concerns about the potential 'over diagnosing' of clinical depression.[66] This is, at least partially, because:

> Most of the individual symptoms of depression are readily recognisable as extensions of common human feeling states. […] It is the unusual person in the population who does not evidence any of these symptoms to some degree. To some extent, depression is a part of everyday life.
>
> Depression and its features, then, can be both a part of normal functioning and a severe psychological disorder. (Monroe, 228-9)

When even the most knowledgeable experts in the field struggle to put into succinct, explicit terms what differentiates the truly 'pathological' aspects of 'clinical depression' from 'more explicable and transient states of sadness' that exist as 'state[s] within the normal range of human experience', it is inevitable that misunderstandings and misconceptions about these

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[64] Edmund S. Higgins and Mark S. George, *The Neuroscience of Clinical Psychiatry: The Pathophysiology of Behavior and Mental Illness*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2013), p. 252.

[65] Steven D. Barger, Nadine Messerli-Bürgy and Jürgen Barth, 'Social Relationship Correlates of Major Depressive Disorder and Depressive Symptoms in Switzerland: Nationally Representative Cross Sectional Study', *BMC Public Health*, 14 (2014), 1-10 (p. 1).

[66] G. Parker, K. Fletcher and D. Hadzi-Pavlovic, 'Is Context Everything to the Definition of Clinical Depression? A Test of the Horwitz and Wakefield Postulate', *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 136 (2012), 1034-8 (p. 1034).

kinds of mental health conditions will continue to permeate public discourse.[67] These misconceptions are not helped, of course, by the lingering stigma associated with open communication about such things.

Depression and Stigma

The stigmatisation of mental health conditions is hardly new. At the turn of the century, biologist Lewis Wolpert published a journal article lamenting the 'considerable stigma associated with depression'.[68] According to Wolpert, mental illnesses differ significantly from other diseases because they are 'seen as embodying the core of the person and not just affecting some organ like the heart or lungs' (Wolpert, 223). Rather than being a physical ailment with obvious diagnosable causality, depression is a mental illness without any proven biological explanation.[69] This, in turn, leads to stigmatisation, precisely because the lack of a definitive scientific explanation for the condition creates the impression that depressed individuals are somehow personally to blame for their condition. In Wolpert's words, 'depressives are seen as unpredictable people who, if they really tried, could pull themselves together' (Wolpert, 223).

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[67] Christina Simko, 'The Problem of Suffering in the Age Prozac: A Case Study of the Depression Memoir', in *To Fix or To Heal: Patient Care, Public Health, and the Limits of Biomedicine*, ed. by Joseph E. Davis and Ana Marta González (New York: New York University Press, 2016), pp. 63-83 (p. 78). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Simko', followed by page number.

[68] Lewis Wolpert, 'Stigma of Depression - a Personal View', *British Medical Bulletin*, 57 (2001), 221-224 (p. 222). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Wolpert', followed by page number.

[69] For a time, there was some belief that a serotonin imbalance caused depressive symptomatology. This theory has been discredited in recent years due to a lack of scientifically sound evidence. For more information see, for example: William Schultz, 'The Chemical Imbalance Hypothesis: An Evaluation of the Evidence', *Ethical Human Psychology and Psychiatry*, 17.1 (2015), 60-75; Philip J. Cowen and Michael Browning, 'What has serotonin to do with depression?', *World Psychiatry*, 14.2 (2015), 158-60; Hal Arkowitz and Scott O. Lilienfield, 'Is Depression Just Bad Chemistry?', *Scientific American* (2014) <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-depression-just-bad-chemistry/> [accessed 22 January 2018].

It is worth noting, however, that when Wolpert published his article at the turn of the twenty-first century, the discourse in western culture surrounding mental illnesses was experiencing a period of rapid change. Wolpert was one of numerous authors attempting to write about depression at a time in which the condition was receiving increased attention and scrutiny in medical and scientific fields. It was also a period when individuals found new platforms to share their experiences of illness, largely in the form of written publications—both in the traditional literary sense and also via developing online media forms like blogs. Writing about the personal experience of struggling through illness came into vogue in the late twentieth century, rising in popularity so much by the end of the century that 'illness and disability narratives [became] established as literary genres'.[70] While illness narratives initially focused on physical maladies like cancer and AIDS, by the turn of the twenty-first century, they were focusing on mental illnesses like depression as well.

Even so, the stigma surrounding mental illnesses like depression remains strong. Online articles and blog posts repeatedly lament its continued proliferation. In an article for *The Guardian*, Clare Gerada asserts that although mental illnesses like anxiety and depression 'are common' and 'there is now also a greater willingness to talk about them, […] the taboo persists'.[71] Some authors feel forced to write about their struggles under pseudonyms for fear that their honesty will cost them:

> I am using a pseudonym for this essay as well as for my blog and upcoming book. […] The major reason: […] I'm worried that the mental health struggles I talk about in the book will make people hesitant to hire me.[72]

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[70] Ann Jurecic, *Illness as Narrative* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), p. 3.

[71] Clare Gerada, 'For Doctors with Mental Illness, "Help Me" Can be the Hardest Words', *The Guardian*, (6 June 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/06/doctors-mental-health-problems-taboo> [accessed 11 June 2018] (para. 1-2 of 13).

[72] Brett Grayson, 'Changing My Name: The Stigma of Anxiety and Depression', *The Good Men Project*, (1 June 2018) <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/changing-my-name-stigma-anxiety-depression-lbkr/> [accessed 11 June 2018] (para. 7-8 of 26).

Others worry because the 'press is filled with the message that people with mental illnesses can be just as successful and fulfilled as anyone else', which implies that '[it's] fine to be mentally ill if you're materially successful and working, less so if you're not'.[73] However, the ease of posting online in the twenty-first century means that these testimonies may represent only the personal perceptions or beliefs of their authors. Is the lingering stigma around depression in some way self-imposed? Is it possible that those suffering from depression feel that those around them are judging them negatively when, in reality, they are not?

Contemporary research indicates that the stigma is real and that self-inflicted misperceptions cannot wholly account for it. According to the Mental Health Foundation in the UK, '[n]early nine out of ten people with mental health problems say that stigma and discrimination have a negative effect on their lives'.[74] Research conducted by the RAND Corporation found that individuals suffering from mental illnesses like depression are 'substantially burdened by mental illness stigma'.[75] Furthermore, this study found that '[n]early all of those with a self-acknowledged past-year mental health problem (about 90 percent) reported an experience with discrimination during that year' (Wong, 6). Additional research suggests lingering stereotypes exist. They posit inaccurate positions such as that 'persons with mental illnesses are violent and dangerous' or that 'mental illness is brought about by a person's action or inaction or are [*sic*] due to moral character flaws'.[76] According

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[73] Dylan Brethour, 'What If I'm Not The "Right" Kind of Mentally Ill?', (12 April 2018) <https://ravishly.com/right-kind-mentally-ill> [accessed 13 April 2018] (para. 1 of 22, 6 of 22). Subsequent references in the text will be given as 'Brethour', followed by paragraph number.

[74] 'Stigma and Discrimination', *Mental Health Foundation* (2018) <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/stigma-and-discrimination> [accessed 10 June 2018] (para. 7 of 15).

[75] Eunice C. Wong and others, 'Stigma, Discrimination, and Well-Being Among California Adults Experiencing Mental Health Challenges', RAND Corporation (2015), 1-13 (p. 2). Subsequent references in the text will be given as 'Wong', followed by page number.

[76] Rebecca L. Collins and others, 'Interventions to Reduce Mental Health Stigma and Discrimination: A Literature Review to Guide Evaluation of California's Mental Health Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative', RAND Corporation (2012), 1-35 (p. 3). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Collins', followed by page number.

to the United States' General Social Surveys (GSS), the majority of the population 'attributed both schizophrenia and depression to neurobiological causes', but the survey also indicated that 'nearly one in three U.S. adults endorsed the view that schizophrenia and depression are a result of "bad character"' (Collins, 3). Evidently, depression stigma has a strong hold over the public imagination. And 'the growing message' in societal discourse that the only way 'it's fine to be mentally ill [is] as long as you're indistinguishable from someone who isn't' further burdens individual sufferers (Brethour, 11).

This is one of the reasons that creative interrogations of mental health conditions—like *FACE the Music*—are potentially so important. By examining mental health conditions from an 'everywoman' position, fictional accounts can reinforce the idea that mental health suffering is not some strange, impenetrable thing only a few people in the know—aka sufferers themselves—can understand. Instead, it is much more universal. It is nothing more or less than a kind of pain, a kind of suffering that everyone has the capacity to identify with, if they will only try:

> You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who ever had been alive. Only if we face these wounds in ourselves can we understand them in other people.[77]

This is, of course, what good illness memoirs attempt to do, too. They make the specific universal; they 'touc[h] on thoughts, feelings and experiences that *many* readers c[an] relate to'.[78] However, attempting to truthfully communicate what it is like to live with a chronic mental health condition, like depression, to a wider range of people—particularly those who

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[77] Jane Howard, 'Telling Talk from a Negro Writer', *LIFE Magazine*, 24 May 1963, pp. 81-90 (p. 88).

[78] Kim Brittingham, 'Who Cares About Your Life Story? Why the Scope of the Memoir You're Writing Matters', <https://writethatmemoirrightnow.com/2019/01/31/who-cares-about-your-life-story-why-the-scope-of-the-memoir-youre-writing-matters-if-you-want-readers/> [accessed 14 April 2020] (para. 12 of 23); original emphasis.

have never experienced this kind of suffering themselves—is challenging, in more ways than one.

Depression as Rhetorical Problem

In her book *Black Dogs and Blue Words: Depression and Gender in the Age of Self-Care*, Kimberly K. Emmons proposes that depression is, essentially, a rhetorical problem:

> It is a double cruelty that depression often silences its sufferers. Beyond its affective pain, […], individuals experiencing the symptoms of depression often seem to have limited linguistic resources available to them. According to many sufferers, words cannot describe the pain of depression, and yet it is ironically a condition largely known through the words they do find. Access to treatment occurs only through the interpretative act of diagnosis, and diagnosis itself depends on the report of recognizable symptoms. The patterns of expression through which individuals articulate their experiences as, for example, matters of brain chemistry, fundamentally shape their ideas of health and illness. (Emmons, 13)

As Emmons suggests, those who are diagnosed with depression face the difficult challenge of having to figure out how to communicate their mental, psychological pain in words. But this challenge is made all the more difficult by the fact that words so often seem to fail to measure up to the task.

As a text, *FACE the Music* wrestles with the challenge of trying to communicate the incommunicable while simultaneously engaging with it in a self-aware, self-reflexive way that highlights how, in some ways, 'words cannot describe the pain of depression' (Emmons, 13). For example, about halfway through the novel, Natalie confesses that just having a clinical diagnosis does not actually provide her a means of communicating the realities of her day to day experiences to others. She tells Gwyneth, '[t]he diagnostic words don't mean much to me. They never seem to actually capture how I'm feeling or doing; I still don't have a good way to describe what's going on in my head most of the time' (Beyer, 185). Natalie is

hardly alone in feeling this way. Virtually every account of living with mental illness, regardless of medium—from blog entries to illness memoirs—expresses this same sentiment.

And yet, in order to combat stigmatisation and work towards more open and honest communication about mental health conditions like depression, we have to use words, inadequate though they may seem. One of the key ways many writers attempt to work through this contradiction is by moving away from the literal towards the figurative. As author John Green so eloquently puts it in his podcast *The Anthropocene Reviewed*:

> I don't know if I'm alone in this regard, but I have this omnipresent pain inside me, a constant and gnawing pain that I'm always trying to distract myself from feeling. This pain is generally a kind of minor background anguish that only occasionally gets bad enough to take over my life, but it's also never not there. It is hard for me to describe the pain without resorting to figurative language […].[79]

Although Green gives no indication that he is talking, specifically, about the pain of depression, his description here seems as fitting a description for living with the mental health condition as any. Furthermore, his assertion that he must 'resor[t] to figurative language' to 'describe the pain', seems to perfectly encapsulate the kinds of approaches undertaken by others attempting to write on the subject of mental health.

Figurative language is often used in literary forms to communicate the incommunicable. Illness memoirs and fictional accounts of living with chronic mental health conditions are no exception. In *Prozac Nation*, one of the first published depression memoirs that helped define the genre, author Elizabeth Wurtzel describes her experience of living within her depression in this way:

> I'm the girl who is lost in space, the girl who is disappearing always, forever fading away and receding farther and farther into the background. Just like the Cheshire cat, someday I will suddenly leave, but the artificial warmth of my smile, that phony, clownish curve, the

[79] John Green, 'Tetris and the Seed Potatoes of Leningrad', *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, 15 November 2018, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/anthropocene-reviewed/episodes/anthropocene-reviewed-tetris-and-seed-potatoes-leningrad> [accessed 4 June 2020].

> kind you see on miserably sad people and villains in Disney movies, will remain behind as an ironic remnant. […] Because with every day that goes by, I feel myself becoming more and more invisible, getting covered over more thickly with darkness, coats and coats of darkness that are going to suffocate me in the sweltering heat of the summer sun that I can't even see anymore, even though I can feel it burn.
>
> Imagine, […], only knowing that the sun is shining because you feel the ache of its awful heat and not because you know the joy of its light. Imagine being always in the dark.[80]

While the imagery in this passage is both effective and evocative, it also leaves a reader with the distinct impression that Wurtzel is aware her use of figurative language can only get her so far. Seemingly concerned that one metaphoric example is not sufficient to truly communicate what she needs it to, Wurtzel does not leave off after describing herself as 'the girl who is lost in space'. Instead, she extends the metaphor, adding additional descriptive phrases, almost as if she is hoping that if she extends the metaphor long enough, something will land. However, in actuality, what she ends up doing is confusing and mixing the metaphor, losing specificity in the process. What each of Wurtzel's readers is 'imagining' by the end of the passage will be as unique as they are.

Welsh poet Gwyneth Lewis also uses figurative language in her memoir, likening the experience of depression to a 'murder mystery'. According to her, in '[e]very serious episode of depression':

> Your old self is gone and in its place is a ghost that is unable to feel any pleasure in food, conversation or in any of your usual forms of entertainment. You become a body bag. […] objects in a room have a stronger will than your own. You are both the corpse and the detective. […] Your job is to find out which part of you has died and why it had to be killed.[81]

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[80] Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation* ([New York]: Riverhead Trade, 1994; repr. New York: Riverhead Books, 2002), p. 61. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Wurtzel', followed by page number.

[81] Gwyneth Lewis, *Sunbathing in the Rain: A Cheerful Book About Depression* (London: Flamingo, 2002), p. xiii. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Lewis', followed by page number.

Fictional accounts, too, frequently rely on figurative language as a key mode of communication. In Jasmine Warga's *My Heart and Other Black Holes*, the mental health troubles of the protagonist, Aysel, appear throughout the novel in conjunction with a recurring image-based motif: 'the black slug of depression'.[82] This 'black slug' is a constant presence on the edge of Aysel's consciousness, 'devouring any happy thoughts [she] allow[s] [her]self', 'slithering around, slurping up [her] potential energy for joy' (Warga, 71; 186). And it is something that she is able to recognise in others like herself—'[t]he black slug lives inside of FrozenRobot, too' (Warga, 54). In Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, the character Minerva is very likely depressed and is described by the narrator as crying '[e]very night and every day. […] She is always sad like a house on fire—always something wrong'.[83] In *The Memory of Light*, author Francisco X. Stork has his central characters attempt to differentiate between 'different kinds of sadness' to draw distinctions between 'normal sadness' and 'clinical depression' using figurative language.[84] Normal 'sadness' is described as containing something 'that is moist and cool, like a summer rainstorm' (Stork, 173). There is something almost refreshing, renewing about it. This is in contrast to depression which is described as being stifling, restricting—depression is 'more than a word […] it is something [you] can feel and touch and taste. […] It's a heavy, thick fog, yellow and pale purple, the color of a bruise, that fills up a room with no windows, no air, no light' (Stork, 39).

In *FACE the Music*, however, I specifically chose not to rely on figurative language to depict Natalie's struggles with her own chronic depression. Partly, this was because

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[82] Jasmine Warga, *My Heart and Other Black Holes* ([London]: Hodder & Stoughton, 2015), p. 39. Kindle eBook. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Warga', followed by page number.

[83] Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992; repr. 2004), p. 84.

[84] Francisco X. Stork, *The Memory of Light* ([New York]: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2016), pp. 38-9. Kindle eBook. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Stork', followed by page number.

figurative language has been used so frequently in these kinds of narratives that I felt I could not say anything that had not been said previously. But, also, heavy reliance on figurative language did not seem entirely appropriate to the narrative I was constructing. While autobiographical depictions in memoirs and first-person fictional accounts lend themselves to this kind of reflective 'telling', I found it did not work so well in the third-person narrative form within which I was working.[85] Relying heavily on figurative language and metaphoric descriptions seemed too prescriptive, dictating to readers what to think instead of allowing them to think for themselves. However, choosing to *show* what living with depression is like in narrative form instead of *telling* readers about it presented its own challenges.[86] The realities of day to day life under the influence of a mental illness like depression are extremely repetitive, and conveying these recurring experiences literally does not necessarily create a satisfying sense of narrative structure.

In the first draft of *FACE the Music*, the beginning of the novel was filled with episode after episode of Natalie sitting around feeling numb and listless or, alternatively, breaking into tears without any clear causality. While these kinds of episodes are truthful representations of the symptomatology and experience of life with persistent depressive disorder, they lack something necessary to create a compelling prose narrative. This first draft fell flat, giving readers insufficient reason to engage with the protagonist and invest in her mental health struggles.

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[85] I am using the word 'telling' here in terms of writing technique. For more information see, for example, Andrew Cowan's chapter 'Don't Tell Me' in *The Art of Writing Fiction* (Harlow, England: Longman, 2011), pp. 49-65; Derek Neale's chapter 'Showing and Telling' in *Writing Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 129-56 (p. 130); Wayne C. Booth's chapter 'Telling and Showing' in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 3-22; and William Kenower's chapter 'Critiques and Workshopping' in *Fearless Writing* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2017), pp. 62-75.

[86] Again, I am referring to 'showing and telling' in terms of writing technique. See footnote 85.

However, I still wanted to focus on showing what living with depression is like without resorting to potentially overly-directive figurative language. Artificially constructing metaphors and imposing them on the text felt wrong; I had already firmly established in the narrative that Natalie feels an inability to communicate, with words, what living within her depression is actually like. This is a crucial point in my text, reflecting testimonies from real sufferers, who express frustration and dissatisfaction with their own feelings of being unable to communicate effectively. Looking for another way to represent Natalie's struggles, I returned to my research. That is when I noticed a common thread running through all the depression memoirs, illness narratives, fictionalised accounts, scientific studies, etc.—the fact that suffering from chronic mental health conditions like depression robs sufferers of a sense of self.

In *Prozac Nation*, Wurtzel feels like 'the girl who is disappearing always', but her self-alienation goes even deeper than that: 'I was consumed by depression, and by the drugs I took to combat it, so that there was nothing left of me, no remainder of the self' (Wurtzel, 61; 123-4). Gwyneth Lewis's murder mystery metaphor conveys a similar idea, that within depression '[y]our old self is gone' (Lewis, xiii). Sally Brampton, likewise, makes similar claims in her memoir *Shoot the Damn Dog*: 'I am reduced, made feeble. […] I am a shadow of the self I used to be'.[88] Fictional characters echo similar sentiments. In *My Heart and Other Black Holes*, although Aysel feels disconnected from the heart of her inner self due to her struggles with the 'black slug of depression', she is reminded that there is a different person who still exists, somewhere deep down inside her:

> My breath catches when I reach […] the drawing of me. The girl I'm staring at is not me, but she is me. Her large eyes are focused away from the viewer, but there's something in them I don't immediately recognize: hope. Her posture looks straighter than mine, like

[88] Sally Brampton, *Shoot the Damn Dog: A Memoir of Depression* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008; repr. 2009), p. 32.

> she's stronger, more resilient. […] I tear the drawing out of the sketch pad. […] I need it to remind myself that I can be this girl, that this girl is inside of me. (Warga, 39; 232)

Psychiatrists and other scientists conducting clinical research into mental health conditions like depression are, likewise, aware of the phenomenon that suffering from chronic mental health problems can leave individuals feeling separated from their sense of self. The intended purpose of therapy is often to help individual patients 'revise [their] sense of self-identity in ways that promote healing', though this requires a self-conscious awareness that it will be 'a lengthy and painstaking process of re-construction—far from the instantaneous transformation medical advertisements promise' (Simko, 72-3).

Furthermore, clinical practice must also take into account that medical interventions—such as the taking of antidepressants—will most likely have 'ramifications [on] illness frameworks for self-identity' (Simko, 65). Sociologist David A. Karp interviewed fifty different individuals for his book *Is It Me or My Meds? Living with Antidepressants* and discovered that '[a]lmost to a person they felt that medication made them different'.[89] This, of course, as Karp himself acknowledges, 'raise[s] moral questions', but he feels that, more importantly, it 'provoke[s] puzzling questions about identity and authenticity':

> Who am I really? Is there an essential self that distinguishes me from others? How does my sense of self change over time? […] [Do we], perhaps […] have as many selves as there are situations in which we act? (Karp, 97)

Turning my attention to questions of identity—like those proposed in Karp's work—opened up new possibilities within the narrative structure of *FACE the Music* to interrogate Natalie's depression in much more specific terms. It enabled me to re-examine the 'mad artist' stereotype, exploring the ways Natalie's depression manifests itself specifically in terms of

[89] David A. Karp, 'Searching for Authenticity', in *Is It Me or My Meds? Living with Antidepressants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 95-126 (p. 97). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Karp', followed by page number.

how it separates her from her music and, consequently, her sense of self. These things shall be addressed in more detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: IDENTITY—CONSTRUCTING A PROTAGONIST

Some Conceptual Considerations

What is identity? Philosophers and theorists have been wrestling with this question for centuries. Current conceptions of selfhood and personal identity propose that:

> *Identities* are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is. Identities can be focused on the past—what used to be true of one, the present—what is true of one now, or the future—the person one expects or wishes to become, the person one feels obligated to try to become, or the person one fears one may become. Identities are orienting, they provide a meaning-making lens […]. Together, identities make up one's *self-concept*—variously described as what comes to mind when one thinks of oneself […], one's theory of one's personality […], and what one believes is true of oneself […].[90]

Identity theory attempts to make sense of all of these various component elements of identity, seeking to arrive at a consensus as to how identity formation and regulation occurs.[91] According to Karen Cerulo, a sociologist at Rutgers University, '[t]he study of identity forms a critical cornerstone within modern sociological thought'.[92] This is, primarily, because:

> Throughout their lives, people find themselves needing or wanting to rethink their sense of who they are, to perform 'identity work' […]. Changing career, becoming a parent, or retirement, all are life events that might cause someone to feel that some aspect of their

[90] Daphna Oyserman, Kristen Elmore and George Smith, 'Self, Self-Concept, and Identity', in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, ed. by Mark. R. Leary and June Price Tangney, 2nd ed (New York: The Guilford Press, 2012), pp. 69-104 (p. 69); original emphasis. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Oyserman', followed by page number.

[91] In the present discussion, I will be focusing on 'identity theory' as it specifically relates to contemporary research in the fields of sociology and social psychology. While many other fields contribute significantly to discourses surrounding identity investigations—psychoanalysis, psychiatry and philosophy, for instance, as well as linguistic theory, narrative theory, etc.—I lack space here to address or account for these other interpretations.

[92] Karen A. Cerulo, 'Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23 (1997), 385-409 (p. 385). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Cerulo', followed by page number.

> identity has evolved, changed or been lost. Sometimes these changes are anticipated and desired, and sometimes they are unwanted and unexpected.[93]

Virtually every event, every circumstance in our lives has some bearing on our sense of identity—some potential to impact and shift the way we view ourselves in relation to ourselves and the world in which we live. Identity theory attempts to account for these potentialities, 'focus[ing] primarily on the formation of the "me," exploring the ways in which interpersonal interactions mold an individual's sense of self' (Cerulo, 386).

During the twentieth century, much of the work carried out by prominent psychologists and other identity theorists was dedicated to trying to determine whether identities are '"stable" or not'.[94] By the end of the century, a consensus was reached that firmly established identities are *not* 'the fixed markers people assume them to be' (Oyserman, 70). Contemporary theorists posit that instead of being 'fixed and frozen', identity is changeable .[95] It is 'dynamically constructed in the moment', a constantly evolving 'configuration of the self that develops over time' (Oyserman, 70; McAdams, 7). And while theories that the 'unity of self can be incorporated into a conception of multiplicity' that makes 'for a more comprehensive understanding of the self' can be traced back to at least the nineteenth century, it was not until the twentieth that 'research suggest[ing] that the self is a multiplicity' became commonplace.[97] Much of this research followed in the wake of initial

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[93] Katherine Collins, 'Building a Self: Community Self-Build and the Reconstruction of Identity', in *Self-Build Homes: Social Discourse, Experiences and Directions* (London: UCL Press, 2017), pp. 192-205 (p. 193).

[94] Samuel Pehrson and Stephen Reicher, 'On the Meaning, Validity and Importance of the Distinction Between Personal and Social Identity: a Social Identity Perspective on Identity Process Theory', in *Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change*, ed. by Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 97-117 (p. 110). Kindle eBook.

[95] Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, 'Introduction', in *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, ed. by. Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006; repr. 2007), pp. 3-11 (p. 7). Subsequent references in the text will be given as 'McAdams', followed by page number.

[97] Seymour Rosenberg, 'Multiplicity of Selves', in *Self and Identity: Fundamental Issues*, ed. by Richard D. Ashmore and Lee Jussim (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 23-45 (p. 26).

publications of works by Erik Erikson, a pre-eminent psychologist.[98] In his book *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Erikson proposes:

> An optimal sense of identity […] is experienced merely as a sense of psychological well-being. Its most obvious concomitants are a feeling of being at home in one's body, a sense of "knowing where one is going," and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count.[99]

Furthermore, Erikson suggests that the adolescent period is of crucial importance for identity development because it is the period during which individuals first become consciously aware of 'identity confusion' as they attempt to determine where they 'fit' into larger society (Erikson, 246; 246-59). According to Erikson, this kind of confusion does not take place in childhood because individuals possess a certain amount of 'self-certainty' as children that they are ever after trying unsuccessfully to return to:

> All through childhood tentative crystallizations of identity take place which make the individual feel and believe (to begin with the most conscious aspect of the matter) as if he approximately knew who he was—only to find that such self-certainty ever again falls prey to the discontinuities of development itself. (Erikson, 160)

In *FACE the Music*, my construction of Natalie's personal identity consciously reflects this Eriksonian framework.[100] Natalie pines for the 'self-certainty' she possessed as a child, constantly returning to her memories of spending summers with her grandparents in Connecticut.

ProQuest Ebook; Stanley B. Klein, 'The Self: as a Construct in Psychology and Neuropsychological Evidence for its Multiplicity', *WIREs Cognitive Science*, 1.2 (2010), 172-183 (p. 173).

[98] Richard Stevens, *Erik H. Erikson: Explorer of Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 1.

[99] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), p. 165. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Erikson', followed by page number.

[100] I do not mean to imply here that the novel is intended to be read solely through an Eriksonian framework, or that my work endorses an Eriksonian conception of identity. I simply highlight how certain aspects of his theories inform elements within this particular prose narrative.

These childhood summers were a time when Natalie felt ‘a clear consciousness of inner identity’ (Erikson, 20). It was when she first discovered her passion for music, the chance circumstance of her grandmother arranging for her to ‘take piano lessons’ leading to the revelation that she ‘had an “exceptional aptitude” for the piano’ (Beyer, 25). Finding music allowed Natalie to make sense of her world in a way she had never experienced before—giving her a clear sense of who she was and what she wanted to do with her life. For her, making music was ‘like being able to do magic’ (Beyer, 26). But, more importantly, when she was first starting out, Natalie unquestioningly believed that she was *good* at it, that making music was an integral part of who she was and how she understood the world. She would ‘hear’ music in her head—‘fragments of melodies’ (Beyer, 26)—that she was unable to ignore, and when she stopped resisting them, she discovered that she had a natural talent for not only playing music, but composing as well: ‘[t]here was something so cool about that, that I could take this cacophony of random sounds in my head and put them together to make the most glorious harmonies’ (Beyer, 26). She was not just making music; she was creating *glorious* harmonies.

So much of how Natalie orients her understanding of herself is linked to this time in her life, precisely because she was not yet worrying about needing to fit into ‘the ideal prototypes of the day’ or ‘to settle on an occupational identity’ (Erikson, 128-9). She was simply concerned with being herself—and music played an integral part in that. And, in spite of what her experiences with depression have done to warp her sense of self since then, both her conscious and subconscious selves distinctly remember her childhood self-certainty and Natalie clings to it; her association with music is the one centering and orienting aspect of herself that her depression cannot quite manage to separate her from completely.

Because she recognises that period as the last time she can remember having a stable sense of self, she associates all of those childhood memories—and her grandmother in

particular—with the ideal version of herself to which she is desperately trying to return. For this reason, even though she knows Gwyneth is resistant to the idea, Natalie keeps pressing the issue, wanting to talk about her grandmother throughout *FACE the Music*:

> "Did you [and Gran] ever bake together?"
> Gwyneth didn't respond.
> "I mean, I know she was a lot older than you were, but there must've been some things that you did together, right?" Natalie said. "Look, I know you didn't like me looking through your private things and it was wrong—really, *really* wrong of me—but I promise I won't do it again. So, can't we just talk? A little bit?"
> Gwyneth sighed. "I still don't want to talk about my sister, Natalie."
> "Why?"
> "Drop it."
> "But, I don't understand."
> "I didn't want to talk about your grandmother yesterday and I still don't want to now."
> "I thought that was because of what I'd done, breaking your trust and all—"
> "No, that wasn't it. It's just… I said I don't want to talk about it. Why is that so difficult for you to understand?"
> "Because it doesn't make any sense—"
> "Not everything in life makes sense, Natalie." (Beyer, 97-8; original emphasis)

Natalie associates her grandmother with a time when she felt she knew who she was and who she wanted to be, a time when '[a]ll was right with the world' and she was 'safe and loved' (Beyer, 36).

More recently, however, Natalie's worldview has been warped by her struggles with depression. Her depression interferes with that which Erikson claims individuals require to experience a sense of coherence and 'wholeness' within their inner identity:

> [An individual] must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he promises to become in the anticipated future; between that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceived others to see in him and to expect of him. (Erikson, 87)

Natalie's sense of internal continuity has been altered by her experiences with chronic depression to the point that she cannot reconcile the person she was 'during the long years of childhood' with the person she believes she will 'become in [her] anticipated future'. She is

no longer confident in her musical abilities and is constantly preoccupied with fears that she is 'failing to live up to [her] potential', that she is 'not as good as [she is] supposed to be', and that she is 'actually just a blight on society' (Beyer, 183). Her self-impressions are so coloured by her depression that she barely recognises herself anymore. And when she speaks of her natural aptitude for music to Gwyneth, she is only capable of doing so under the guise of self-deprecation brought on by her depressed self: 'I know it sounds stupid. Like the most ridiculous, self-absorbed bullshit' (Beyer, 26).

Many of Natalie's actions in the first half of *FACE the Music* can be interpreted as her subconsciously working to confirm this depressed sense of self. Her actions reflect a specific kind of maintenance of the self that identity theory describes as 'self-affirmation' theory.

Self-Affirmation Theory

Self-affirmation theory was first proposed by psychologist Claude Steele in 1988:

> I propose the existence of a self-system that essentially explains ourselves, and the world at large, to ourselves. The purpose of these constant explanations (and rationalizations) is to maintain a phenomenal experience of the self—self-conceptions and images […] I view these self-affirmation processes as being activated by information that threatens the perceived adequacy or integrity of the self and as running their course until this perception is restored, through explanation, rationalization, and/or action.[101]

At the most basic, fundamental level, self-affirmation theory 'asserts that the overall goal of the self-system is to protect an image of its self-integrity'.[102] In other words, self-affirmation theory 'begins with the premise that people are motivated to maintain the integrity of the self' when their perceptions of themselves are 'threatened' (Sherman, 185).

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[101] Claude M. Steele, 'The Psychology of Self-Affirmation: Sustaining the Integrity of the Self', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 21 (1988), 261-302 (p. 262).

[102] David K. Sherman and Geoffrey L. Cohen, 'The Psychology of Self-Defense: Self-Affirmation Theory', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38 (2006), 183-242 (p. 185). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Sherman', followed by page number.

In the twenty-first century, prominent identity theorists Peter Burke and Jan Stets extend Steele's affirmation theory in their work, which attempts to examine how our day to day interactions impact our self-perceptions. Burke and Stets claim that in *every* interaction in our daily lives we are seeking 'identity verification', regardless of whether or not the identity we are trying to verify is 'good' (Burke, 51). According to them:

> behavior is the result of the relation between perceived meanings of the self in a situation and internal self-meanings held in the identity standard. Behavior is goal-oriented in that there is an attempt to change the situation in order to bring perceived situational self-meanings in line with the meanings held in the identity standard. (Burke, 51)

In interactions, we want to be seen or perceived in ways that verify some aspect of the identities we have envisioned for ourselves:

> In identity theory, the assumption is made that individuals desire to verify who they are even if that identity is negative […] In the same way that people with positive self-views seek out positive feedback and positive interaction partners, people with negative self-views seeks [*sic*] negative feedback and negative interaction partners. (Burke, 59)

According to this expansion of Steele's basic self-affirmation theory, in every interaction, we shape our behaviours according to the deeply ingrained, unconsciously internalised views we have of ourselves. Our behaviour, then, changes when people fail to see us in the way we want—or expect—to be perceived. Interestingly enough, '[a]ny discrepancy' between our 'self-view[s]' and others' perceptions, 'either positive or negative' will result in 'increased distress' and force us to alter our behaviour (Burke, 84-5).

Natalie often encounters these kinds of discrepancies in *FACE the Music*. Her sense of self identity and self-integrity has been warped, twisted by her depression. The internalised self views she holds are almost exclusively negative and self-debasing, especially early in the novel. Thus, many of the things she does—particularly in response to the interactions she has with Gwyneth and the Lloyd-Joneses—are subconscious reactions seeking to confirm her negative self-views. Here, let me briefly acknowledge that the terms 'subconscious' and

'unconscious' are not interchangeable, and attempting to differentiate between the two remains a highly fraught and controversial subject, particularly within contemporary psychoanalytical circles. I am not attempting to resolve any of this tension here, but I use the term 'subconscious' in this discussion deliberately. While there are truly unconscious aspects associated with Natalie's sense of identity and personhood—the exact origins of her depression, the source of her musical inspiration, her connection to her music when she feels it is 'working'—the behaviours she engages in to reinforce her depressed sense of self are subconscious rather than truly unconscious. When pressed, forced to think about the 'why' behind certain things she does, Natalie is able to produce an explanation for them. As she does, for example, in her exchange with Gwyneth at the end of chapter thirty-four (Beyer, 243-6) in which Natalie claims she believes: 'if I decide that I'm not good enough before anyone else does, when I don't succeed, it'll hurt less' (Beyer, 244). Therefore, although her actions to reinforce her depressed sense of self lie beneath the level of conscious intent, for Natalie, these behaviours are subconscious activities rather than unconscious processes. One example of this kind of behaviour is Natalie's insistence on returning time and again to the photo album hidden under her bed in the attic room, in spite of being 'certain Gwyneth wouldn't approve of what she was doing' (Beyer, 150).

Moreover, Natalie revealing to Gwyneth that she has been 'going through [her] private things' reflects the implications of self-affirmation theory (Beyer, 91). Natalie and Gwyneth are discussing a piece of music that Gwyneth has overheard Natalie working on earlier in the text. Natalie insists that she 'was just messing around' but Gwyneth refuses to accept that explanation, insisting that what Natalie was actually doing was composing: 'Repeating the same notes over and over again? I may know next to nothing about music, but even I know that's more like composing than improvising' (Beyer, 88). Even though Natalie tries to convince her great aunt that the song 'wasn't that good anyway', Gwyneth continues

to contradict her, insisting that she 'liked it', that '[i]t was kind of catchy. Cheerful, even' (Beyer, 89). At this point, Natalie shifts the conversation away from her music towards her grandmother and Gwyneth's personal history (Beyer, 89-91), opening up an avenue of discussion that she knows may potentially lead to the revelation that she has found the photo album hidden in her attic bedroom. Though this action is subconscious, it is also intentional. Natalie's internalised views of herself are not being reflected in the feedback that she is receiving from Gwyneth. So, in order to reaffirm the negative views she has of herself, she reacts in a way that she knows will lower Gwyneth's opinion of her.

Another example of self-affirmation theory at work in *FACE the Music* comes after Gwyneth's piano has been relocated into the longhouse and retuned, and Natalie finally finds herself freely able to play piano for the first time since arriving in Wales. She is fleetingly reminded that 'playing music [is] supposed to be a thing of joy, not a thing of anxiety and distressing paranoia' (Beyer, 147). In these moments, she is reconnected to the version of herself that inarguably possessed a natural aptitude for playing the piano:

> […] she couldn't wait any longer. She wanted to play, *needed* to play.
>
> She stretched out her hands and tentatively struck a chord. The sound rang out clear and true. Natalie smiled. She struck another perfectly balanced chord. Then another and another. Her heart soared. (Beyer, 148; original emphasis)

However, Natalie's depressed self cannot reconcile itself to allowing her to feel such positive emotion in response to herself and her abilities. And so, almost immediately after she experiences the elation of having her heart soaring:

> […] she quickly discovered her fingers just would not respond at the speed they were supposed to. The pieces she attempted to play didn't sound right. They didn't flow properly; the sounds were jarring and just out of sync, not rhythmically pleasing, not building off of one another the way they were supposed to be.
>
> […] the more she played, the worse it got. She wasn't tickling the ivories, she was terrorising them. […]
>
> All of a sudden, she was struck by an urgent need to get away from the piano. She needed to stop looking at the thing that she loved that was causing her nothing but grief. (Beyer, 148-9)

This sudden downward spiral is Natalie's subconscious self attempting to reaffirm her depressed sense of self as not 'good enough' (Beyer, 77).

Natalie's interpretation of her abilities as overwhelmingly incompetent directly after moments of 'perfectly balanced' perfection is a jarring juxtaposition that I purposefully draw attention to in the text. At this point in the novel, readers are well aware that they are witnessing events unfolding through Natalie's perspective and that this perspective is potentially skewed—particularly when applied to Natalie's own sense of self and personal abilities. Natalie responds overly negatively because her depressed self interferes with her impartiality. Readers witnessed a similar occurrence several chapters before when Natalie played at the local pub. Then, Natalie was focused on all her 'mistakes', worrying over the fact that 'the song was stilted, jolting […], not passionate enough':

> As she struck the final set of chords, she tensed and waited, waited with bated breath for the inevitable boos she knew would follow such a substandard performance.
>
> She wasn't expecting applause.
>
> But applause—hearty, genuinely enthusiastic applause—was what she received. (Beyer, 107; 108-9)

The audience's response differs so drastically from Natalie's expectations that it is clear Natalie's perspective is less than reliable. This is further confirmed when Emma Lloyd-Jones discusses the event with Natalie later:

> "My playing then was clumsy, uncoordinated… I was terribly out of practice…" Natalie trailed off.
>
> "That's crazy. You're being silly. We all thought it was absolutely magnificent."
>
> "That's very nice of you to say, but I'm sure that's not true," Natalie muttered.
>
> "Come on, now. You played for like half an hour, without stopping, some of the most complicated tunes I've ever heard, and you played them from memory. If that's not a good example of what it means to have an extraordinary musical talent, I don't know what is."
>
> "Really?" Natalie was less than convinced.
>
> Emma, however, was in no doubt. "Absolutely," she replied, firmly. (Beyer, 194-5)

As the novel makes clear to the reader, Emma's interpretation of the events directly contradicts Natalie's own not because Emma's perceptions are flawed, or because Emma is a novice when it comes to music, but because Natalie's warped self-views are clouding her judgement.

It is obvious from the very beginning of *FACE the Music* that Natalie's depression has an exceptional hold over her—frequently overwhelming all the other aspects of her personal identity. The Role Identity Model provides a lens that illuminates how the trajectory of the work as a whole reflects Natalie's journey toward a more coherent sense of self.

Role-Identities

A refinement of the ideas discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the Role-Identity Model asserts that each individual's sense of identity is not based on a single defining sense of self, but is instead rooted in a combination of 'multiple selves' known as 'role identities' (Burke, 10; 114). This model was first proposed in the mid-1960s by American sociological social psychologists George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons and has since been expanded and refined by other prominent contemporary theorists like Burke and Stets. In the original theory, McCall and Simmons assert that identity formation and regulation is directly linked to our ability to 'identif[y] persons'—ourselves and others—in terms of 'systematically related categories' that can be 'referred to as *social positions* (or, […], as "social statuses" or even as "social types")'.[104] In other words, it is the categories by which we define ourselves (and others) that make up our role identities. Role identities are based on recognisable labels, things like 'wife, major general, third baseman, first violinist, Lutheran, Irishman, […]

[104] George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons, *Identities and Interactions* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 66; original emphasis. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'McCall', followed by page number.

"young man of great promise," plant manager', etc. (McCall, 66). According to the Role-Identity Model, our personal identities are, at all times, made up of a combination of multiple role identities. So, for example, '[o]ne can be a teacher, a wife, a mother, a friend, a PTA member, and so on' all at the same time (Burke, 24).

Meanings and expectations one person associates with a certain 'role identity' are not necessarily the same as the meanings and expectations held by another. For instance, one person may see their 'student identity' as containing 'the meaning of being "academic"', while another individual's 'student identity […] contains the meaning of being "social"' (Burke, 49). The 'academic' student will probably 'regularly atten[d] class, take notes, pas[s] exams, and finis[h] courses' while the 'social' student is more likely to 'spend […] time socializing with [his] friends, attending parties and other social events, and so forth' (Burke, 49). It follows that, '[e]ssentially, the meaning of one's identity has implications for how one will behave, and one's behavior confirms the meanings in one's identity' (Burke, 49). In other words, our every day behaviours and interactions have as much, if not more, bearing on the shaping and management of our identities than the major events in our lives:

> Everyone has, […], a good many role-identities—one for each social position he occupies, aspires to occupy, or has fleetingly imagined himself occupying. These role-identities are not separate, each unto itself, but are woven into a complex pattern of identities. That is, they mutually influence one another and are organized into a more or less systematically interrelated whole. (McCall, 76)

When a person's role identities are operating together in the way they are supposed to, they are arranged into a 'hierarchy of *prominence*' that allows for fluid movement between role identities, depending on the context or circumstances of an individual's daily interactions (McCall, 77; original emphasis). So, for example, if a person has role identities as both mother and teacher, at school the teacher role identity will be at the forefront, while at home the individual will seamlessly transition into her mother role identity without even having to think about it.

However, seamlessly transitioning between role identities does not always work the way it is supposed to, and conflicts can arise. Often conflicts occur because 'each individual has a great many role-identities, [and] not all of [these role identities] are necessarily compatible or equally legitimate' (McCall, 76).

Role-Identities in Action: A Literary Case Study

The idea to work with role-identities in *FACE the Music* was inspired, in part, by Catherine Merriman's short story 'The Last Thirty-Nine-Year-Old Housewife'. In some ways, the short story is a textbook example of role identity examination. The protagonist, Judith, finds herself undergoing an identity crisis when the last of her friends goes back to work:

> Six friends with young children, six mothers, six wives. […] Four of us, since last summer, back at work. Suzanne and I were the last, and now I'm on my own. Her children are younger than mine, but she's not a mother any more. She's not a wife any more. She's a civil servant. And what am I? […] I'm still a wife, and a mother, and now I'm invisible.[105]

Judith feels pressured to do what her friends have done and go back to work. She feels it is not enough to be a mother and a wife—those role identities no longer give enough definition to her sense of self. She wants some other role to play so that she will also be something like her friends rather than an 'invisible' nothing.

The story progresses as an examination of Judith's identity crisis, with Judith's identity conflict manifesting itself in terms of role identities—quite literally. Every time she catches a glimpse of her reflection, she sees herself in terms of the primary role she is playing in her current situation. As she makes 'a cheese soufflé for lunch' she sees herself as a chef, catching a glimpse of her reflection 'wearing a white hat. A very tall white hat, with […] a

[105] Catherine Merriman, 'The Last Thirty-Nine-Year-Old Housewife', in *Of Sons and Stars* (Powys: Honno, 1997), pp. 1-14 (p. 2). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Merriman', followed by page number.

soufflé crown' (Merriman, 4). Later, after a trying fight with her daughter, Judith imagines she has been transformed into a witch with 'warts on her nose' and 'wearing a pointy black hat' (Merriman, 8). Eventually, she does not even have to see her reflection to know the various roles she is fulfilling. Caring for her ill son, 'Judith felt a mushy wave of tenderness for him and knew without looking that her head had just sprouted a crisp white cap adorned with a red cross' (Merriman, 10).

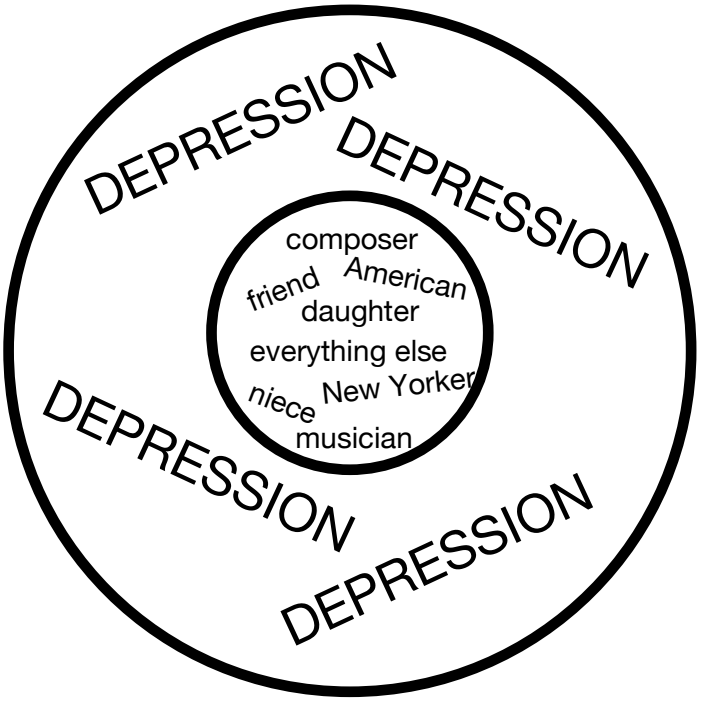
Rather than being organised into a proper prominence hierarchy, Judith's role identities are in conflict with one another, with one taking precedence in any given moment at the *expense* of all the others. Instead of feeling as though she is a coherent whole made up of multiple functioning selves, Judith feels her identity is fractured, fragmented into pieces that cannot be reconciled with one another. Eventually, she panics, trying to reconcile the various role identities she has been playing and observing in herself over the course of the past several days:

> To my daughter I am apparently a witch or a skivvy. To my son, a chauffeur and a nurse. To my husband — among other things, I hope — a sex kitten. To my parents, a little girl. In town I am a harassed customer and at playgroup a ridiculous earth mother… […] I am in a panic … why? […] Because I'm worried that I should be doing something more with my life. Because I'm frightened that I am not fulfilling myself. Not fulfilling some duty to myself … To myself. (Merriman, 11-2)

It is only when Judith realises that all these elements are a part of her, but no single one of them is the whole of who she is or what she can be, that she begins to calm down. She realises she is not a nothing, but rather many somethings represented by all the various roles she plays (Merriman, 12). Once Judith makes that realisation, she is finally able to reconcile herself to the existence of the multiple role identities she possesses and to the fact that her personal identity is a cohesive collection of all of them.

Role-Identities in *FACE the Music*

Like Judith in Merriman's 'The Last Thirty-Nine-Year-Old Housewife', at the start of *FACE the Music*, Natalie's role identity hierarchy is not functioning the way it is supposed to. In fact, it does not so much resemble a hierarchy, but rather two concentric circles—with depression forming the much larger outer circle while all the other potential roles Natalie may play are relegated to positions in a much smaller circle contained within it.



Natalie knows, deep down, that a 'depressed person' (Beyer, 80) is not the only thing she is capable of being, but in her daily interactions, that role-identity most often takes precedence. This is because, at the time the novel begins, her depressed identity is the one with which Natalie associates the most 'salience', a term McCall and Simmons describe as follows in their conception of the Role-Identity Model:

> The […] hierarchy of role-identities in terms of salience represents their relative order of priority as possible sources of performance in the situation. […] The individual tries to work into his actual performance those identities that are high in the order of salience and is less concerned with working in those that are low in the order. (McCall, 84; 85)

In interactions, individuals will foreground actions that reinforce the more 'salient' of their role identities, even if those actions threaten or discredit one or more of their other role identities in the process. This is certainly the case with many of Natalie's interactions in *FACE the Music.* In her phone calls with her father, she frequently reacts negatively to his attempts to console her in a standard father-daughter dynamic, rejecting her role as 'daughter' and instead focusing on reaffirming her sense of self consumed by depression:

> "[…] I'm going to need you to be more specific, if I'm going to be able to help, Nat-cat—"
>
> "Stop calling me that! I'm not five anymore! You can't just make funny faces at me and spin me around and make all my problems go away! So just stop. Stop telling me everything's going to be okay because it isn't. […] everything is so far from okay it's ridiculous, everything is fucked—it's all totally fucked and I—I—I—I—I—"
>
> "Natalie, calm down. Breathe. You're having a panic attack."
>
> "I know. I know I'm having a panic attack. I'm trapped in the middle of nowhere fucking Wales with my life literally falling apart around me—[…]—of course I'm having a fucking panic attack!!!"
>
> "Breathe. You need to BREATHE. It's going to be okay. This has happened before. You know you aren't in any real danger. You're just overreacting."
>
> "I'm not overreacting, you're underreacting! What the fuck were you thinking sending a fucking depressed person to the fucking middle of nowhere fucking Wales!?!?!?!" (Beyer, 79-80)

Yet, there are a few core elements of her other role identities that are intact enough for Natalie to cling to. She is a musician and composer—but Natalie considers her status as *composer* of paramount importance. For Natalie, the distinction is a crucial part of her identity, but her great aunt Gwyneth and many of the other people she comes into contact with do not understand the difference between musician and composer. Take, for example, this exchange between Natalie and Gwyneth in chapter two:

> "I wasn't thinking about how hard it must have been for you. […] especially having to leave all your instruments behind in New York—what with you being a musician and all."
>
> "I'm a composer, technically," Natalie murmured.
>
> "What's the difference?"
>
> "Doesn't matter."
>
> "Clearly, it matters to you."
>
> "Well, a musician just plays music. Composers create music for musicians to play." Gwyneth looked skeptical; Natalie searched for a better explanation. "Composers make new music that hasn't been heard before."
>
> "Don't all musicians improvise though? I know the fellows down at the pub improvise all the time."
>
> "Well, yes," Natalie admitted. "But composing is more than just improvising. It's creating set instrumentations and writing them down so they can be replayed—and not just by the person who came up with them." Natalie trailed off, finding it incredibly difficult to explain this concept she simply took for granted—that there was a clear distinction between musicians and composers. (Beyer, 23-4)

Gwyneth's inability to confirm something that Natalie finds central to her identity is extremely problematic for Natalie. It challenges one of her sole remaining views of herself, complicating her initial attempts to shift her 'identity hierarchy, by giving higher salience' to any role identity other than her depressed one (McCall, 101). This has the potential to devastate Natalie's sense of personal identity as a whole. According to the Role-Identity Model:

> our most important role-identities—[…]—are, at the same time the most vulnerable because we cannot take [them] lightly […]. The more involved we are, the more we have to gain, but the corollary of this assertion is that we also have more to lose.
>
> If an important role-identity has been unequivocally threatened by loss of role-support […], one is likely to experience misery and anguish. He may attempt partially to alleviate this reaction by shifting his identity hierarchy, by giving higher salience to his more successful role-identities. He deprecates the threatened identity—chiding himself for being so obsessed with it and […] tries to maintain a going concern psychologically by reducing his investment in the threatened role-identity. In a sense, he thus sacrifices a role-identity in an attempt to save the standing of the self as a whole. (McCall, 101)

If Natalie cannot get some kind of external support from those around her to validate the role identities she associates with the musical side of herself, she may sacrifice those role identities in favour of other identities which do receive external validation. Though it is far from her ideal version of herself, Natalie certainly receives external validation verifying her depressed self: from her father—'[t]hat's just the depression talking' (Beyer, 80), in memories of her ex-fiancé Michael—'[y]ou're going through a really rough time and I don't know how to be there for you like you need. […] You just don't care anymore!' (Beyer, 40-1), and even in her interactions with Gwyneth—'[c]ourse you're depressed' (Beyer, 21).

Luckily, however, despite Natalie's inability to communicate with words the distinction between musician and composer, Natalie's talent and musical abilities speak volumes. Whenever Natalie plays either her oboe or the piano, she receives the kind of identity verification she needs in order to preserve these most important role identities, helping to reinforce her sense of personhood as containing more than the singular role of her

depressed self. Gwyneth rarely does anything but compliment Natalie's efforts—'That song you were playing […] Sounded pretty nice […]' (Beyer, 72); 'That was… beautiful […] beautiful… pure beauty…' (Beyer, 285) and even becomes an instigator for Natalie to play—'*I* would actually like to hear some music. […] I didn't realise how much I missed the music before you came' (Beyer, 240; original emphasis). The Lloyd-Joneses also play a vital role in providing the 'role-support' Natalie needs to keep her musical role identities intact (McCall, 73). Emma recognises Natalie's musical talent—'You play so beautifully' (Beyer, 191); Rhys thinks of her as 'a real musician' (Beyer, 105); and Cole, most importantly, is a kindred spirit awed by Natalie's musical prowess who desperately wants music to be a fundamental part of his own life—'Can you teach me? Teach me to do that?' (Beyer, 200); 'I love playing. I don't want to give it up' (Beyer, 293).

In fact, Gwyneth and the others in Wales frequently recognise Natalie's musical talent when Natalie herself neglects it—or, worse, intentionally derogates it because her depressed world view is clouding her perception of reality. Since 'identities are continually in need of legitimation' (McCall, 75), these characters' role-support is crucial in helping to reinforce for Natalie that other role identities are just as legitimate and significant—maybe even more so—than her depressed one. As her musician and composer role identities receive external support, their salience in her internalised hierarchy of prominence increases. This is reflected, subtly, throughout the text with the recurring 'mnemonic devices of musicians' motif.

During these sections, Natalie is playing either her oboe or the piano, usually improvising or attempting some form of composition. As discussed in chapter one, the motif functions as a kind of shorthand, allowing me to express musical composition in a text-based medium. But it also reflects Natalie's own growing understanding of herself as having a personal identity that extends *beyond* her struggles with depression. Natalie's sense of who she is and who she wants to be develops throughout *FACE the Music*; with this exploration of

the self comes not only a more coherent, self-confident sense of identity, but also a stronger internal voice. The recurring 'mnemonic devices' motif reflects this process. The further into the novel we extend, the less strictly structured the pieces become. The first refrain reads:

> *The mnemonic devices of musicians:*
> *1) Every Good Boy Does Fine*
> *2) FACE*
> *3) Good Boys Do Fine Always*
> *4) All Cows Eat Grass*
>
> *Every Good Boy Does Fine*
> *FACE*
> *Good Boys Do Fine Always*
> *All Cows Eat Grass*
>
> *Every Good Boy Does Fine*
> *All Cows Eat Grass*
> *Every Good Good Fine Boy Does Fine*
> *Fine Fine Fine*
> *Always*
> *Fine*
> *Cows Eat Grass*
> *Good Boy*
> *Good Cow*
> *Good Grass*
> *Good Good Good*
> *Fine Fine Fine*
> *Good Boys Do Fine*
> *Good Girls…*
>
> The oboe squawked in a most ungodly fashion. Natalie's fingers froze.
>
> *Good Girls*
>
> *What do they do?* (Beyer, 71-2; original emphasis)

In this first instance, Natalie's internal voice is really only repeating the basic words that make up the mnemonic devices. However, later in the text, strict adherence to the original convention—that only the words in the mnemonic devices are at Natalie's disposal—fades away. These internal explorations begin to take on Natalie's own individual voice as she re-

connects with both the 'musical' and 'composer' selves that are crucial to her conception of her personal identity:

> *Cows Eat Grass*
> *Grass Fine Always*
>
> *silly Arrogant Boys*
> *with their Grass-Eating Cows*
> *Doing Fine*
>
> […]
>
> *Every Good Boy Does Fine*
> *Always*
> *Good Boys Do Fine Always*
> *Always*
> *what About the Girls?*
>
> *Girls Beg Demeaningly For Acceptance?*
> *Always*
>
> *teach A Girl music And she Automatically Assumes her place is Below the Boys*
> *less important than their Cows*
> *And the Grass they Consume* (Beyer, 241-2; original emphasis)

This stronger sense of self in the later 'mnemonic devices' refrains becomes possible once Natalie's depressed role identity is no longer the only one she views as salient within herself.

However, I do not want to imply that this happens *solely* because of the role-support she receives from others. The role-support of others is not enough on its own to shift the salience of Natalie's various role identities within her prominence hierarchy: '[i]n the end, it is ourselves that we have to live with, and the role-support that we accord *ourselves* is the most important' (McCall, 74; emphasis added).

Natalie has known since the first time she played piano at eight years old that music is of paramount importance to her, and she confesses as much to Gwyneth: 'music, for me, used to be my whole life. It was all I ever wanted to do' (Beyer, 173). But, in the intervening years, other aspects of her life have interfered. In *FACE the Music*, Natalie's circumstances

afford her opportunities to rediscover and reconnect with this most important and fundamental aspect of her personal identity:

> Natalie played […] as though her life depended on it. And, perhaps, it did. […]
>
> Music [was] the thing that had never failed her, no matter how many times she failed it. The thing that never abandoned her, no matter how many times she attempted to abandon it.
>
> Even now, in the midst of the confusion of which her life was currently comprised, music still held true to its promise, still awed and inspired her with its transformative power. […] When she was composing, it […] seemed like no matter how bad things got […] within the music itself lay some clue as to how to patch the broken pieces and make things better again.
>
> […] Bubbling up from deep within her, turning the world on its head, bringing her peace, shining a light in the darkness, music was her own unique wellspring of strength, weathering every storm, calming every tempest. (Beyer, 251-3)

Natalie is able to reconnect with this part of herself largely because of new role identities she acquires over the course of *FACE the Music.* During her time in Wales, Natalie takes on many new roles including great niece, American abroad, shop assistant, carer, and piano teacher—among other things. Each new role identity necessitates a rearrangement of her prominence hierarchy and a subsequent internal re-evaluation of the salience of the identities it contains. Since a significant number of these new roles intertwine with the musical roles she already values deeply in the core of her inmost self—teacher and great niece, for instance—these new roles help to lower the salience of her depressed role identity while reinforcing the salience of her identities as both composer and musician. Although Natalie is not consciously aware of this identity work, fundamentally, *FACE the Music* is about Natalie's growing understanding that, though her depressed role identity will always be a part of her, it does not have to be the *only* dominant role in her life.

CHAPTER FIVE: AL FINE—THE SETTING, THE STRUCTURE, AND THE ENDING

The Setting

FACE the Music is a novel that focuses on its protagonist's journey towards identity reorganisation and reconciliation. In some respects, these identity transformations only become possible once Natalie finds herself in Wales. In order to stop her chronic depression maintaining its all-consuming hold over her life, Natalie needs to restructure her role identity prominence hierarchy, and a new, unfamiliar environment forces her to take on new role identities that decrease the salience of her depression.

Though Natalie has family that is Welsh, she grew up in the United States and does not identify as being at all Welsh. At the outset of the novel, she finds herself in the extremely unfamiliar Welsh countryside with her great aunt Gwyneth—a family member whom she has met only once before, when she was twelve (Beyer, 3; 22). This means, as the novel begins, that Gwyneth has no more idea than a total stranger would of who Natalie is. Therefore, for Natalie—a stranger in a strange land—every interaction in the text is not only a *chance* for identity construction, but a compulsory obligation.

Wales is not the *only* setting which would have made this kind of identity exploration possible; however, Wales lends itself to this kind of creative interrogation of identity for a variety of reasons. Of course, an element of personal experience applies to the work. I myself moved from New York City to Aberystwyth in 2016 for my master's studies; afterwards, I stayed in Aberystwyth to complete this doctoral project as well. However, my own experiences transitioning from New York to Wales were very different from the ones depicted in the novel, and although my personal experience informed the work, it was not the main reason I chose to set *FACE the Music* in Wales. I chose Wales as a backdrop for

Natalie's identity explorations largely because of the prevalence of social isolation in the country.

According to research published in December 2017, '[n]early 20% of the Welsh population live in communities of less than 1,500 people'.[106] Since there is 'strong empirical evidence that social isolation acts to harm mental health', positioning my protagonist in a place where social isolation is common was an important narrative tool.[107] There 'is a broad scientific consensus that strong interpersonal relationships are good for a person's mental health and well-being […] that social ties can provide a buffer against stress or anxiety […] and inhibit mental illnesses such as […] depression' (Rohde, 854). Scientific studies have also indicated '[d]epression [is] significantly correlated with social isolation […] and loneliness' and that:

> Young adults who [are] socially isolated [experience] greater feelings of loneliness, and [are] also more likely to grapple with depression, suggesting that social relationships confer benefits for mental health over and above subjective feelings of connectedness […][108]

Moreover, 'socially isolated individuals or those who have been *removed* from or lose members of their social networks might also be at risk for illness due to the loss of social contacts'.[109] In *FACE the Music*, Natalie not only finds herself in a socially isolated location,

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[106] 'The Scale and Causes of the Problems of Loneliness and Isolation', *Health, Social Care and Sport Committee: Inquiry into Loneliness and Isolation* (Cardiff Bay: National Assembly for Wales, 2017), 9-20 (p. 10).

[107] Nicholas Rohde, Conchita D'Ambrosio, Kam Ki Tang, and Prasada Rao, 'Estimating the Mental Health Effects of Social Isolation', *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 11 (2016), 853-69 (p. 865). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Rhonde', followed by page number.

[108] Timothy Matthews, Andrea Danese, Jasmin Wertz, Candice L. Odgers, Antony Ambler, Terrie E. Moffitt, and Louise Arseneault, 'Social Isolation, Loneliness and Depression in Young Adulthood: A Behavioural Genetic Analysis', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 51 (2016), 339-48 (p. 342; 344).

[109] Andrew Levula, Andrew Wilson, and Michael Harré, 'The Association Between Social Network Factors and Mental Health at Different Life Stages', *Quality of Life Research*, 25 (2016), 1725-33 (p. 1725); emphasis added.

she has also been removed from her home and separated from her usual social networks; all of these aspects exacerbate her depressed condition at the beginning of the novel.

In addition to social isolation, the unexpected language barrier also plays a significant role in how the Welsh setting shapes Natalie's experiences in the text. Natalie is unprepared to be in a place where English is not the primary language of communication, as is evident in her surprise and confusion during her first encounter with Emma Lloyd-Jones and later in her feeling 'set […] on edge' by the 'unfamiliar, guttural words' she hears in the pub (Beyer, 58-9; 102). The fact that Natalie does not speak the same language as many of the locals who surround her serves as a narrative tool further isolating the protagonist, particularly in the beginning of the text. Natalie already has a hard time finding the words to properly communicate how she is feeling in her native language—'I still don't have a good way to describe what's going on in my head most of the time' (Beyer, 185)—and being in a place where the right words are not only unknown but also potentially inaccessible to her compounds this struggle.

Natalie's discomfort and surprise at coming up against a language barrier requires somewhat less suspension of disbelief in a Welsh setting than it might elsewhere. I am using the phrase 'suspension of disbelief' here as it is defined in the Oxford *Dictionary of Media and Communication*:

> The concept that to become emotionally involved in a narrative, audiences must react as if the characters are real and the events are happening now, even though they know it is 'only a story'. 'The willing suspension of disbelief for the moment' was how the British poet Coleridge phrased it in 1817, with reference to the audiences for literary works. Schramm [prominent twentieth century American communication theorist] argues that this is a general expectation for all entertainment […]: we are 'prepared to go along with a story or a spoof or a good joke, to identify and agonize with a character who never lived…to have a certain empathy with fictional characters […]'.[110]

[110] Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, 'Suspension of Disbelief', in *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 415.

In other European countries like Germany and Italy, for instance, where an estimated ninety-five and ninety-three percent of the populations, respectively, speak a primary language other than English, it would be difficult to persuade readers that Natalie did not expect to have to communicate in a foreign language during her visit.[111] This is in stark contrast with Wales where, although at least an estimated nineteen percent of the population speak Welsh, there are well-known and lingering stereotypes that Welsh is somehow either 'a dead' or 'a dying language'—'a thing of the past'.[113] Therefore, it is both believable and understandable that a foreigner like Natalie would be surprised to find herself in the midst of a Wales where Welsh is commonly spoken.

At this point, I feel it is important to emphasise that the Wales presented in *FACE the Music* is in no way intended to be a literal or factual representation of contemporary Wales. It is a literary construction of place, not intended to represent '"real" geography'.[115] According to writer Leonard Kriegel:

> literary geography—[…]—has less to do with the actual shape place assumes in the mind than it does with how the idea of place feeds the imagination. […] it is not the shape of the "real" landscape that concerns writers; it is how that landscape is imagined and then conceived. (Kriegel, 604)

Kriegel argues that representations of place in fiction writing are not meant to be literal representations of place; they will *necessarily* be shaped and coloured by authors' perspectives and personal experiences. In this way, the 'Dublin of *A Portrait of the Artist* and

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[111] 'Languages across Europe: Germany', *BBC News Online* (2014) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/european_languages/countries/germany.shtml> [accessed 8 September 2020] (para. 1 of 2); 'Languages across Europe: Italy', *BBC News Online* (2014) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/european_languages/countries/italy.shtml> [accessed 8 September 2020] (para. 1 of 2).

[113] Colin H. Williams, 'The Lightening Veil: Language Revitalization in Wales', *Review of Research in Education*, 38.1 (2014), 242-72 (p. 242); Harry Campbell, 'Myths About Welsh', *Gwybodiadur* (2003) <http://gwybodiadur.tripod.com/myths.htm> [accessed 8 September 2020] (para. 3 of 46; para. 5 of 46).

[115] Leonard Kriegel, 'Geography Lessons', *The Sewanee Review*, 102.4 (1994), 604-11 (p. 605). Subsequent references in the text will be given as 'Kriegel', followed by page number.

Ulysses is not Dublin but Joyce's Dublin' (Kriegel, 607). However, just because fictional representations of place will inherently be in some ways unrealistic, this does not mean that authors have no responsibility to truthfulness in their portrayals. After all, as author Cindi Myers puts it, any time 'you decide to use a real place in your fiction, […] [you risk] raising the ire of a real place'.[116] Since Wales is a real place, this was something I was very conscious of while writing *FACE the Music.* After all, there is a growing body of literary criticism surrounding the problematic nature of over-romanticising the Welsh countryside as a place:

> The link between rural Wales and notions of authentic Welshness has been a long-standing theme in both the academic literature and in popular representations. The Welsh countryside and its imagined characteristics hold a very privileged place in dominant constructions of national identity. Myths of a peaceable and tolerant nation, deeply embedded in the national imagery are rooted in an idealized Welsh rural community life […]. Myths are of course important to nation building but they also function as a powerful exclusionary force. Welsh imaginings of the countryside as the heartland of Welsh language and culture have fostered not only a sense of cultural purity and cultural homogeneity but have rendered rural territory as the site for the protection of very exclusive constructions of national identity.[117]

FACE the Music is not attempting to add to discussions about Welshness or Wales' national identity. The novel is set in Wales, but it is not a text *about* Wales. The focus of F*ACE the Music* is not on the place, but on the characters—their interactions and experiences. Moreover, I have been careful to establish that the Wales portrayed within the text is *always* a Wales as seen through a foreigner's eyes.

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[116] Cindi Myers, 'Writing About Real Places in Fiction', <https://rmfw.org/2013/11/06/writing-about-real-places-in-fiction/> [accessed 28 August 2020] (para. 4 of 10).

[117] Charlotte Williams, 'Experiencing Rural Wales', in *A Tolerant Nation? Revisiting Ethnic Diversity in a Devolved Wales*, ed. by Charlotte Williams, Neil Evans and Paul O'Leary (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), pp. 177-93 (p. 177).

The narrative perspective in *FACE the Music* is presented in third person, but third person limited—closely linked to Natalie's point of view at all times.[118] And, as was briefly discussed in the previous chapter, Natalie's perspective is somewhat unreliable. So, not only is the literary representation of Wales in *FACE the Music* given through an outsider's perspective, that perspective is known to not necessarily be 'realistic'. Even so, I am careful to ensure that Natalie experiences different relationships with Wales as a place throughout the text. Although, for the most part, she '[feels] that Wales [is] too gloomy, too damp, and too cut off from the rest of the world for her liking' (Beyer, 321), Natalie also experiences moments of true joy and inspiration as she takes in the beauty and majesty of the land that surrounds her:

> On Wednesday, Gwyneth drove them up to Snowdonia. It was an absolutely glorious day, the sun streaming down between the purple-grey clouds in shafts of pure, clear light.
>
> As she stood at one of the many scenic vantage points, on the crest of a steep slope looking down on the Welsh countryside stretched out before her three hundred and sixty degrees in every direction, Natalie was really struck for the first time by just how astonishingly awesome the countryside was. It was like nothing she'd ever seen before. And it was awesome, truly awesome in the precise meaning of the word. She was awed.
>
> The land that stretched before her was […] unlike anything she could imagine anywhere else on earth. This was the Grey King's Wales, the land of mystery and magic she'd always dreamed of visiting as a child—the land of her Gran's songs, the land of the kinds of stories she'd only ever read in books come to life. (Beyer, 296)

Still, it is made very clear in the text that Wales is not and will never be Natalie's home (Beyer, 292-3; 296-7); her relationship with the place is necessarily going to be different

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[118] Third person limited is a narrative perspective which uses third person pronouns rather than first person ones, but is still closely linked to a single character's perspective:

> It is also known as 'single character point of view' because the author allows us to see the world through the perspective of the chosen character. It combines the intimacy of the first-person point of view with a degree of distance as the hidden narrator is able to paraphrase the thoughts of the character, as well as to organise and comment on the story.*

*Linda Anderson, 'Point of View: Degrees of Knowing', in *Writing Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 105-128 (pp. 105-6).

from that of a native Welsh person. And, at all times, the focus of the narrative is not on the setting, but on how the place shapes the protagonist and her self-perceptions. Immediately after Natalie is struck by the awe-inspiring beauty of Snowdonia in the above passage, her focus shifts back to herself and her personal identity struggles:

> And that was when it hit her. It was all too much. […] She tried to imagine herself staying here, living in a place like this instead, but she couldn't. She didn't fit here. Not really. She was a being of flesh and blood, not myth and magic.
>
> And she suddenly felt lost. Completely lost and alone.
>
> She'd managed to make it through the rest of the day, […], acting like everything was fine. She […] [hoped] that if she could just keep Gwyneth thinking that everything was normal, was fine, she could convince herself that that was the case, that everything was in fact fine.
>
> But it wasn't. […] Yes, she was sad she'd be leaving and she felt like she'd missed out on so much—and that she had no one but herself to blame—but there was more to it than that.
>
> She was also afraid. Afraid of leaving this life behind and having to go back to New York and essentially start all over again in a place where she was nothing, less than nothing, one soul in a sea of millions where no one really knew her and no one noticed whether or not she did anything at all. (Beyer, 296-7)

The novel foregrounds Natalie's personal identity struggles, not the setting.

The Structure

Yet, by setting the majority of the novel in Wales, and having Natalie return to New York at the very end, the structure of *FACE the Music* borrows from a narrative structure most commonly found in fantasy and mythic narratives—the 'hero's journey'. This kind of narrative was first codified by Joseph Campbell in his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. According to Campbell, what is crucial about this kind of narrative is that the 'hero, […], is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations […] His second solemn task and deed […] is to return then to us, transfigured,

and teach the lesson he has learned'.[119] There are several major parts to these kinds of narratives—the main ones being 'separation, initiation and return'.[120] Critically, over the course of his journeying, the 'hero' must be 'transformed' so that, once his initial journey is complete, he comes back to where he came from to share the wisdom he has gained during his travails (Campbell, 21). This structure is most often found in mythic and fantastic narratives because, according to Campbell, '[i]t is the business of mythology proper, and of the fairy tale, to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way from tragedy to comedy. Hence the incidences are fantastic and "unreal": they represent psychological, not physical, triumphs' (Campbell, 21).

However, Campbell did not intend for this kind of narrative structure to be limited to mythic or fantastic tales exclusively. He believed, rather, that this kind of transformative journey represents a kind of 'fundamental experience that everyone has to undergo'.[121] To Campbell's understanding, the hero's journey is 'a cycle, it's a going and a return' that applies equally to doing 'something beyond the normal range of [human] achievement and experience' and to the process of maturing from 'childhood' into adulthood (*PoM*, para. 7-10 of 189). Still, the majority of the texts that follow Campbell's hero's journey fall into the realm of fantasy fiction—specifically into a category defined by fantasy fiction scholar Farah Mendlesohn as the portal fantasy. According to Mendlesohn, '[t]ypically, the quest or portal fantasy begins with a sense of stability that is revealed to be the stability of a thinned land—

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[119] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2008), pp. 14-5. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Campbell', followed by page number.

[120] Brian Atterby, 'Structuralism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, ed. by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 81-90 (p. 85).

[121] 'Episode 1: Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth', *The Power of Myth*, transcript of television episode, 21 June 1988, <https://billmoyers.com/content/ep-1-joseph-campbell-and-the-power-of-myth-the-hero's-adventure-audio/> [accessed 20 August 2020] (para. 10 of 189). Subsequent references will be given in the text as '*PoM*', followed by paragraph number.

[…]—and concludes with *restoration* rather than *instauration* (the making over of the world)'.[122] Furthermore, '[a]lthough individuals [characters] may cross both ways, the fantastic does not' (Mendlesohn, 2). Although neither the portal fantasy nor the hero's journey perfectly describes the narrative structure of *FACE the Music*, key structural elements in the work are purposefully borrowed from these kinds of narrative structures.

FACE the Music begins in a place of separation as Natalie arrives in Wales, alone, isolated, and cut off from everything and everyone she knows back home in New York. An initiation period follows as Natalie struggles to cope with her new surroundings and is reluctant to adjust, in many ways actively resisting the idea. But, eventually, Natalie accepts her fate and begins to move forward, finding common ground with Gwyneth and taking on new role identities that help to shift her understanding of both her new environment and herself. And, in the end, as with a portal fantasy or Campbell's hero's journey, Natalie returns to her home in New York changed by her experiences in Wales.

Just as in a portal fantasy where 'individuals may cross both ways' but the 'fantastic does not', the people and experiences that Natalie encounters in Wales do not go back to New York with her. They remain behind in Wales; she carries back only their influences on her personal identity development.

The Ending

Because this is the case, *FACE the Music* ends with hope—the hope that the personal identity transformations Natalie has undergone during her time in Wales will endure—but without any guarantee that Natalie's struggles with depression are in any way permanently resolved. I

[122] Farah Mendlesohn, 'The Portal-Quest Fantasy', in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), pp. 1-58 (p. 2); original emphasis. Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Mendlesohn', followed by page number.

take great care in the text to emphasise that her time in Wales has not 'cured' Natalie of her depression:

> "You're not better, are you?" Gwyneth asked, eventually.
> Natalie's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"
> "Your depression, it hasn't totally gone away."
> Natalie actually laughed at that. Gwyneth looked hurt. "Sorry, it's just… I don't think depression works like that. Least not the kind I have."
> "Wasn't that the whole point of you being here in the first place? To get rid of your depression?"
> "That… was my dad's hope, yeah. […] the truth of the matter is that I don't know that it'll ever fully go away. It's a part of me. Not a part I'm proud or particularly fond of, but it's also not something I can just wish away. […] depression doesn't work that way." (Beyer, 300-1)

Even though Natalie returns home to New York without being 'cured', she has been significantly 'transformed' since the beginning of the novel. Her depression is still a part of her, but it no longer dominates every aspect of her life.

This kind of ending differs from those found in many other fictional narrative accounts of depression. A significant number of these texts are geared towards young adults and, frequently, such novels end with once suicidal teenagers no longer suicidal. For instance, both Jasmine Warga's *My Heart and Other Black Holes* and Francisco X. Stork's *The Memory of Light* (discussed in chapter three) end this way. Many illness memoirs echo similar sentiments—that sufferers are recording their experiences after they have managed to move past their major depressive episodes. In *Sunbathing in the Rain*, Gwyneth Lewis claims 'depression doesn't last forever. No matter how bad you feel, you can survive and come out into the sunlight on the other side' (Lewis, xx).

However, the notion that it is possible to leave depression behind and 'come out' on the 'other side' is not everyone's experience of depression. Especially for sufferers from chronic conditions like persistent depressive disorder—which is Natalie's diagnosis—mental illness is not something that ever truly and permanently goes away. Instead, patients have to

face and deal with periods of depression time and time again. Knowing this, I felt it was important to end *FACE the Music* on a hopeful note, but without Natalie having been somehow magically and completely cured. In this way, the ending of my novel bears intentional similarities to the ending of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* as discussed in chapter one, and also to the short story 'The Fog' by Welsh author Corinne Renshaw.

In 'The Fog', the protagonist, Laura, suffers from a deep depression in the wake of her husband's death.[123] She lives alone, in a cottage up in the Welsh hills, isolated from the townsfolk in the nearest village, but she does 'not feel loneliness. Rather, she [feels] nothing, a blankness as white as the fog enveloping the house, hills, world' (Renshaw, 85). Although she is an 'artist' and 'illustrator' by trade, ever since the death of her husband, Laura's latest 'book remain[s] untouched':

> Laura, alone in the cottage, could not draw or make notes. Often, she sat at a table in the kitchen, note-books in front of her. She even picked up a pencil, but it fell again from her finger. She tried to make sense of words but they danced and tied themselves up into knots. They were meaningless scratches on the paper, as obscure as Egyptian hieroglyphics and less ornamental. They represented nothing. (Renshaw, 86)

Like Natalie in *FACE the Music*, Laura finds her depression so overwhelming that she can no longer be creative—the things that used to give her life meaning have become meaningless. Laura has lost an integral part of herself and no longer can find the will to live under such conditions.

In this state of utter despair, Laura discovers an extremely pregnant cat abandoned on her property, left to die (Renshaw, 87-8). The unexpected arrival of the cat is a small, external action that prompts Laura to take on a new role identity as caregiver to the cat and then to her kittens as well. This new role identity initiates a series of tiny internal shifts in

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[123] Corinne Renshaw, 'The Fog', in *The Sunhouse and Other Stories* (Llandysul, Dyfed: Gomer Press, 1996), pp. 84-97 (p. 84). Subsequent references will be given in the text as 'Renshaw', followed by page number.

Laura that eventually lead to her finding her will to live again. Although the ending of the narrative makes it clear that Laura is still deeply affected by her husband's death, she is no longer consumed by it. Her story ends on a hopeful note; while Laura watches the mother cat take care of her kittens, '[s]oftly, she moved away to fetch her drawing pad and pencil, and then, sitting on the floor, she began to sketch with practised strokes' (Renshaw, 97). Laura is capable of being creative again.

FACE the Music ends on a similarly hopeful note. Natalie's experiences in Wales change her, reconnecting her to the creative side of herself. Back in New York, not only is she still playing music, she is also composing again, doing the thing that gives her life a sense of purpose. Most importantly, Natalie is no longer in a perpetual state of depressive despair. Instead, she is in a place where she actually believes in herself and her abilities once more—where she actually believes: '*I will Be Fine*' (Beyer, 336; original emphasis).

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